

*E. Carl Abbott*

## **Introduction**

The Medical Symposium, "Medicine in the Age of Mozart" was organized to honor the 200th anniversary, in 1991, of Mozart's death. Our intent was to explore the several theories of Mozart's illnesses and cause of death at the age of 35. An additional objective was to compare and contrast medical practice in Nova Scotia during the eighteenth century with medical practice in Europe, especially Austria. Unfortunately, some participants were not able to provide manuscripts for this publication. It is worth noting, however, that amongst those who did not, Allan Marble and Laurie Lacey have since published books on their particular areas of research. Mozart's personality and creative gifts were examined as well as his health. Live music performances were also part of the Symposium. The sessions were held at the Izaak Walton Killam Hospital for Children in Halifax, and were open to the public.

The manuscript of Paul Ritvo's study of Mozart's personality and his relationship with his family is one of those not available for publication. Mozart's relationship with his father has been the subject of a number of analyses by psychologists who have suggested that the family dynamics fashioned his immature personality, his financial ineptitude and that his family became the blueprint for his operatic characters, especially his women. A study of the determinants of any musical genius must consider genetic influences and this is the theme of Philip Welch's paper. The importance of genetic factors in musical creativity is well documented with the Bach family but what about the Mozarts? Mozart's education was provided at home by his family. Would Mozart have become a child

prodigy, the most brilliant and gifted musician the world has ever known, without his father's enthusiastic promotion of his talents? Mozart's creative process is examined by David Schroeder. Many have asked, "Did Mozart always publish his manuscripts without revisions?" It has so often been said of Beethoven that he edited and revised laboriously. Schroeder's conclusions about Mozart may surprise. Those who have read the Mozart family's letters will know that they have long been controversial. Was his occasional scatology abnormal or merely part of the writing practice of his day? Does it suggest some pathological process such as Tourette's disorder? These are the questions addressed by Kurt Aterman.

Having examined his genius, creativity and foibles, we moved to an examination of medical practice in eighteenth-century Europe. The age has been called the Age of Enlightenment during which there was a significant shift in attitudes to the arts, music, science and philosophy. Examination of the development of medical knowledge has often lead to the conclusion that the medicine of that time did not keep pace with advances in the arts and music. William Bynum has a different view and his essay, presented early in the Symposium, enlarges our perspective on medical thinking and the practice of medicine in the eighteenth century. Mozart lived during a period when life expectancy was less than 40 years. Infant mortality was as high as 40% in some European countries and a further 40% of the children who survived were dead by the age of 15. Tom Baskett examines the practice of obstetrics in eighteenth-century North America and contrasts it with the practice in Europe. The Mozarts were international travellers and must have been exposed to many infectious diseases including tuberculosis, hepatitis, smallpox, typhoid fever and typhus, as they were rife in eighteenth-century Europe. Hygiene and sanitation were primitive in the cities where they lived. Mozart travelled so much throughout his 35 years that altogether he spent some 14 years away from home, travelling in horse-drawn, unheated carriages over dirt roads in all sorts of weather. In cities such as London and Paris where he spent a considerable amount of time, garbage was often thrown into the streets, drinking water and milk were unsafe and sewage disposal systems were primitive.

Much of the Symposium was devoted to an examination of Mozart's health. Mary Wheeler was the first speaker to summarize current information about his numerous illnesses and also about his final illness.

Others expanded on some of the theories about his early death that have become part of the Mozart legend. His final illness is still a mystery. Was it chronic kidney failure or heart failure from rheumatic heart disease? Was he poisoned by Salieri? An autopsy was not performed because his physicians did not consider it likely that poisoning was the cause of death. The circumstances surrounding his burial are controversial. Although his burial place has never been positively identified, a French archaeologist has recently identified a skull that might have been Mozart's. Did he die as a result of a head injury? Perhaps as a result of foul play? Jock Murray summarizes the background surrounding this mystery and provides a plausible explanation.

The Symposium provided an interesting look at medicine during Mozart's time, combining that with the thoughts of musicologists, interspersed with interpretations of his chamber music by local artists and operatic arias by Heather Pawsey. It was indeed an inspiring and rewarding experience. The organizers of the Symposium appreciate the opportunity provided by *Dalhousie Review* of making the conference papers available more widely.

#### WORKS CITED

- Lacey, Laurie. *Micmac Medicine: Remedies and Recollections*. Halifax: Nimbus, 1993.  
Marble, Allan. *Surgeons, Smallpox and the Poor: A History of Medicine and Social Conditions in Nova Scotia, 1749-1799*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1993.