

Hundred blind and sight impaired composers (nearsightedness excluded unless complicated), with two more extensive pathographies (Bach J.S., Handel G. F.)

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Abstract – This paper presents an overview of composers with impaired sight (Bach J.S., Handel G. F.) in the last five hundred years, according to the data obtained from the biographies of more than ten thousand composers and over a thousand pathographies. This is, to our knowledge, the world's largest processed sample so far. Diseases unveiled and comorbidities have had an impact on lives and (ability to) work of affected composers. Successful sight-impaired (96) composers are more often represented than the deaf (43) composers, indicating that blindness is a lesser handicap than deafness regarding the creativity of composers.

Key words: blind composers, Bach JS, Handel GF

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Introduction

From the biographies of more than ten thousand composers and over a thousand pathographies, 96 sight impaired composers were found. Composers presented in this

work were listed by the year of birth, with the most probable diagnosis/reason leading to sight impairment, some of the pathographies (Bach J.S., Handel G. F) being elaborated deeper. [1-8]

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Table 1 List of sight-impaired composers

Name	Years of birth and of death	Type of diagnosis/reason leading to sight impairment
Conrad Paumann	1410-1473	Ger, congenital cataract
Arnold Schlick	1455-1525	Ger, congenital cataract
Pedro dr Lagarto	1465-1543	Esp, loosing vision late in life (cataract? or glaucoma?)
Antonio De Cabezon	1510-1566	Esp, congenital cataract, amaurosis since birth
Cipriano de Rore	1515/6-1565	Flam, cataract
Martin Peudargent	1525/30-1585	Fra, cataracts, blind by the end of life
Diego Gomez de la Cruz	1550-1618	Esp, diminishing vision (cataract?)
Johannes Nucius	1556 – 1620	Ger, cataract
Heinrich Schutz	1585-1672	Ger, lifelong “half blind”, immature/congenital cataracts
Jacob van Eyck	1589-1657	Ned, blind at birth (congenital cataracts?)
Pablo Bruna	1611-1679	Esp, corneal leucoma bilateraly due to smallpox in infancy
Wilhelm Karges	1613-1699	UK, loosing vision later in life (cataract ?)
John Ferrabosco	1626-1682	UK, loosing vision later in life (cataract ?)
Georg Daniel Speer	1636-1707	Ger, since the age of 64 gradual loss of vision and hearing, senile cataracts?
Antonio de Salazar	1650-1715	Mex, senile cataract, withdrawal from activities about the age of 60 almost blind
Panteleon Habenstreit	1667-1750	Ger, senile cataract with vision disturbances since the age of 66
Turlough Carolan	1670-1738	Irl, blinded by smallpox
Georg Philipp Telemann	1681-1767	Ger, cataracts later in life
Johann Sebastian Bach	1685-1750	Ger, myopia alta, complications after cataract surgery caused blindness (see the pathography attached)
Georg Friedrich Haendel	1685-1759	Ger, retrobulbar neuritis, senile cataract (see the pathography attached)
Davide Perez	1711-1778	Ita, senile cataract, continued composing as blind
John Stanley	1712-1786	UK, posttraumatic blindness (injury at the age of 2!)
Antonio Da Costa	1714-1780	Por, senile cataracts, died blind
Jacob Potholt	1720-1782	Ned, blinded by smallpox
Johann Balthasar Kehl	1725-1778	Ger, blind at the end of life, premature cataract? (or glaucomatous or other neuropathy)
Josef Anton(in) Steffan	1726-1797	Aut, lost sight during the sixth decade of life, probably due to cataract

Table 1 (Continued from previous page)

Name	Years of birth and of death	Type of diagnosis/reason leading to sight impairment
Hendrik Focking	1741-1825	Ned, blind from infancy (juvenile glaucoma?)
Ferdinando Turrini	1745- 1829	Ita, blindness ?
Maria von Paradis	1759-1824	Aut, blind from childhood (juvenile glaucoma?)
Thomas Zwetler	1759-1826	Aut, impaired sight?
Giacomo Gotifredo Ferrari	1763-1842	Ita, blinded at the age of 49, later vision restitution !, central serous retinopathy ?
Simon Mayr	1763-1845	Ger, blindness ?
Friedrich Ludwig Dulon	1769-1826	Ger, blinded by an eye infection in infancy (trachoma?)
Ludwig van Beethoven	1770-1827	Ger, shortsighted, since 1823 suffered from eyes infection, trachoma?
Francis Linley	1771-1800	() , UK, born blind (congenital cataract ?)
Oliver Shaw	1779-1848	USA, blind since birth?, congenital cataracts?, injury of the right eye with knife in infancy, bulbar phthisis, left eye blinded while using the sextant? by solar maculopathy?
John Purkis	1781-1849	UK, blindness ?
Niccolo Paganini	1782-1840	Ita, impaired vision due to mercury intoxication
Ferdinand Ries	1784-1838	Ger, corneal leucoma due to smallpox/herpes, blind on one eye
Friedrich Daniel Kuhlau	1786-1832	Ger, partial vision loss due to injury in childhood
Erik Drake	1788-1870	Swe, last 8 years of life lost vision, died blind, brain stroke?
Carl Czerny	1791-1857	Aut, gradual loss of vision by the end of life, senile cataracts
Lowell Mason	1792-1872	USA, cataracts
William Havergal	1793-1870	UK, impaired vision after a concussion
Giuseppe Saverio Mercadante	1795-1870	Ita, 1838 posttraumatic infection blinded one eye, 1862 brain stroke caused blindness, died after another stroke in the late1869
Karl Gottlieb Reissiger	1798-11859	Ger, impaired sight ?
Ivan Zajc sen	1800-1854	Cro, senile cataract
Ivan Padovec	1800-1873	Cro, injury of one eye at the age of 7, blinded, the other eye amblyopic, since 1848 complete amaurosis, myopia alta degenerativa ?
Charles Auguste de Beriot	1802-1870	Bel, blind at the age of 56, cataract?, neuropathy?
Franz Liszt	1811-1886	Hun, senile cataracts, died blind

Table 1 (Continued from previous page)

Name	Years of birth and of death	Type of diagnosis/reason leading to sight impairment
William Vincent Wallace	1812-1865	UK, after the age of 40 "eye troubles", probably glaucoma ?
Friedrich von Flotow	1812-1883	Rus, gradual loss of vision later in life, cataracts?
Henry Thomas Smart	1813-1879	UK, blinded at the age of 15, suffered from myopia alta, blinded by retinal detachment ?, myopic maculopathy
George Alexander Macfarren	1813-1887	UK, at the age of ten beginning of vision loss, at the age of 47 completely blind, juvenile glaucoma?, retinopathy?
Stephen Heller	1814-1888	Hun, senile cataracts, in his 70-ies asthenopias
Charles Gounod	1818-1893	Fra, gradual loss of vision later in life, cataracts?
Theodor Fuerchtegott Kirchner	1823-1903	Ger, by the end of life almost blind, probably due to senile cataracts
Alfonse Charles Renaud de Vilback	1829-1884	Fra, blindness ?
Ivan pl Zajc	1830-1914	Cro, died completely blind, probably by complicated cataracts/induced glaucoma?
Manuel Fernandez Caballero	1835-1906	Esp, senile cataracts, operated in 1899 and 1902 resp.
Pjotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky	1840-1893	Rus, amblyopic (used magnifying glasses), macular degeneration, optic neuropathy due to alcohol and narcotics abuse
John Steiner	1840-1901	UK, posttraumatic blindness of the left eye at the age of 5
Henri Duparc	1848-1933	Fra, blindness ? during middle ages due to glaucoma?
Thomas Bethune	1849-1908	USA "blind Tom", blind since birth ?
Nikoghayos Tigranian	1856-1951	Arm, congenital cataract
Ruggiero Leoncavallo	1857-1919	Ita, almost completely blind by the end of life, according to age probably due to glaucoma
Matko Brajsa Rasan	1859-1934	Cro, glaucoma, enucleation of one eye due to pain,, blindness of the other by the end of life
Frederik Delius	1862-1934	UK, since 1922 blindness due to neurosyphilis/luetetic optic neuropathy (tabes dorsalis)
Alfred Hollins	1865-1942	UK, blind at birth
Scott Joplin	1868-1917	USA, luetetic neuropathy to amaurosis
Karl Prohaska	1869-1927	Aut, glaucoma, after 1924 unable to work, died blind

Table 1 (Continued from previous page)

Name	Years of birth and of death	Type of diagnosis/reason leading to sight impairment
Louis Vierne	1870-1937	Fra, glaucoma, cataracts
Sergei Vasilevich Rachmaninov	1873-1943	Rus, Marfan sy. with myopia alta complicata, degenerative retinopathy?, subluxated lenses?
William Christopher Handy	1873-1958	USA, blind at the age of 70, glaucoma? cataract?
Arnold Schoenberg	1874-1951	Aut, gradual vision loss, uncontrolled diabetes, diabetic retinopathy
Charles Ives	1874-1954	UK, senile cataracts – operated
Jose de la Cruz Mena	1874-1907	Esp, blinded by leprosy
Manuel de Falla	1876-1946	Esp, suffered from chronic iridocyclitis
Josip Hatze	1879-1959	Cro, by the end of life almost blind, macular degeneration?
Ivan Matetic Ronjgov	1880-1960	Cro, about the age of 70 succesfully operated senile cataracts, composed choir composition “Ti ćeš plakati” (“Thou shall cry”) in honour of his operator
Igor Stravinsky	1882-1971	Rus, retinal detachment due to myopia alta at high age
Andjelko Dobrostal	1885-1922	Cro, blinded in early youth, juvenile glaucoma ?
Uzeir Hajibeyov	1885-1948	Arm, congenital cataracts
Franjo Luchich	1889-1972	Cro, died blind, glaucoma, senile cataract
Jakov Gotovac	1895-1982	Cro, myopia alta, retinal detachment
Alan Bush	1900-1995	USA, gradually loosing eyesight
Joaquin Rodrigo	1901-1999	Esp, blindness due to dyphteria at the age of 3
William Walton	1902-1983	UK, cataracts
Stjepan Lovrich	1903-1982	Cro, died blind, glaucoma?, macular degeneration?
Boris Papandopulo	1906-1991	Cro, large amount of oblique astigmatism bilaterally, cataracts by the end of life
Jean Langlais	1907-1991	Fra, blind due to suspected congenital glaucoma
Gaston Litaize	1909-1991	Fra, congenital cataracts, born blind
Peggy Glanville –Hicks	1912-1990	USA, visual loss due to a brain tumor
Sir George Shearing	1919-2011	UK, congenital cataracts
Milivoj Koerbler	1930-1971	Cro, juvenile diabetes with intraocular haemorrhages, by the end of life nearly blinded due to diabetic retinopathy
Marko Ruždjak	1946-2012	Cro, since childhood squint and deep amblyopy. (1-8)

In the rest of patography we will present comparative patographies of two barock giants: Johann Sebastian Bach (Eisenach, 31. 3.1685.- Leipzig, 28. 7. 1750) and Georg Friedrich Handel (Halle, 23. 2. 1685. – London, 14. 4. 1759).

Although being born in the same year, not too far from one another, they never met.

Bach has spent his life inside the “circle” of some 250 km diameter, Handel travelled intensively, settling down in England; they had somewhat different approaches to life – Bach being the modest man of church (yet prone to alcohol and smoking tobacco), Handel being more passionate, apt to eating and drinking, periodically, practically, on the border of alcoholism; Bach married twice, had 23 children altogether, Handel never married, kept his personal life far from the public eye (yet being very extrovert most of his life). Both of composers got blinded at the same age.

However, the “Finger of destiny” gave the connecting tissue that tried to solve their visual impairment in their later years: famous, bombastic, public broker, considered charlatan but wise operator, “chevalier and gentleman”, an Englishman named John Taylor at that time famous as operator-inventor of a needle for gray dimness over eyes (cataract reclinator?). He used to treat many eye illnesses with the device causing a lot of damage and became his nickname “Munchhausen of medicine”! and in arrogance he described his residing in Leipzig (while operating Bach in March/April 1750) as follows:

“I saw all kind of various animals, like camels, dromedaries etc. But in Leipzig I operated a famous old music-master, I saved his vision, he was educated together with Handel whom I operated later”.

Operation on both eyes failed, most probably due to wrong diagnosis of the vision loss – some sources speculate about the reason for the vision loss was either haemorrhagic glaucoma or, centrally, brain stroke causing central blindness; situation got complicated by inflammation, Bach rested in dark room, depressed doing only some dictations; mid July he suffered from another stroke complicated with fever (pneumonia?) and died on July 28.

From 1751 Handel was not able to write the music himself and had his student Smith write down new compositions, but Handel was unable to conduct as he was used before; the amount of new music was but a shadow of the previous times. He tried to improve situation in 1752, by two operations by means of needles and cuts, performed by eye doctors from the Guy Hospital and by court surgeon later, unsuccessfully. Then he came to the hands of above mentioned Taylor who operated on his eyes in 1753. Taylor reports:

“...with whom I once thought to have some success, having all the circumstances in his favour, motions of the pupil, light, etc., but upon drawing the curtain, we found the bottom defective from the paralytic disorder.”

Another possible wrong diagnosis – speculation is that the cause of vision loss was more likely central vascular disorder with retinal degeneration or ischemic changes complicated with cataracts, diabetes and hypertension; several years later, Handel died of decrepitude.

This example is one of the historical ironies – coincidences: both great composers became blind at the same age, both were operated “because of the cataract”, operations failed, both operated by the same “specialist”, in span of three years and thousand kilometres. [9-10]

Discussion and conclusions

This is the world largest sample of collected patographic data (known to the authors) of this type of pathology. It includes composers with affected sense of vision with distinct presentation of certain subspecies as was possible to obtain from the data. The consequence of these pathologies is reduced creativity and productivity in compari-

son with composers who did not suffer from such pathologies.

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None

Conflict of interest

None to declare

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Stotinjak slijepih i slabovidnih skladatelja (Bach J.S., Handel G. F.)

Sažetak – U radu su izneseni podaci o bolestima organa vida skladatelja u proteklih pet stotina godina. Podaci su dobiveni iz biografija više od deset tisuća skladatelja i preko tisuću patografija. To je do sada najveći obrađeni svjetski uzorak (koliko je autorima poznato). Spomenute bolesti i njihovi komorbiditeti, utjecale su na živote i stvaralaštvo skladatelja. Broj uspješnih slijepih (96) skladatelja dvostruko je veći nego gluhih (43) skladatelja, što upućuje na zaključak da je oštećenje vida manji hendikep u smislu kompozitorske kreativnosti, nego gluhoća.

Ključne riječi: slijepi kompozitori, Bach JS, Handel GF

