

The diseases and destinies of the composers – Celebratory Year 2013 (Gesualdo, Corelli, Gretry, Wagner, Verdi, Britten)

**Darko Breitenfeld¹, Marina Vuksanović², Danijel Buljan³,
Lana Škrgečić⁴, Tomislav Breitenfeld⁵, Roko Granić⁶**

¹*Croatian Physicians Music Society, Croatian Medical Association, Zagreb, Croatia*

²*Croatian Physicians Music Society, Croatian Medical Association, Zagreb, Croatia*

³*Department of Psychiatry, University Hospital Centre »Sestre milosrdnice«, Zagreb, Croatia*

⁴*Croatian Physicians Music Society, Croatian Medical Association, Zagreb, Croatia*

⁵*Department of Neurology, University Hospital Center »Sestre milosrdnice«, Zagreb, Croatia*

⁶*Croatian Physicians Music Society, Croatian Medical Association, Zagreb, Croatia*

Summary – Celebratory years with vast number of composers are rare. After 1985 (Bach, Haendel, D. Scarlatti) and around 2010 (Haydn, Schumann, Chopin), there comes the great year of 2013. These composers are highly sensitive with occasionally severe mental disturbances and lived past 60 years on average, in accordance to the period in which they lived. The composers we considered worthy of special mention are Gesualdo, Corelli, Gretry, Wagner, Verdi and Britten. The composers mentioned above lived relatively long con-

sidering that their siblings (and fellow citizens) of that era were dying at half their age. In the earlier centuries the causes of death were usually infectious diseases-plague at first followed by tuberculosis (Gretry), etc.). In later centuries, thanks to better diagnosis, degenerative diseases were dominant (Wagner, Verdi, Britten).

Key words: diseases, composers, Gesualdo, Corelli, Gretry, Wagner, Verdi, Britten

Correspondence to: **Darko Breitenfeld**, Derenčinova 25, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia.
E-mail: darko.breitenfeld@kbsm.hr

INTRODUCTION

It is rare to have a celebratory year with such a vast number of composers. After the 1985 (Bach, Haendel, D. Scarlatti) and around 2010 (Haydn, Schumann, Chopin), there comes the great year 2013. These composers are highly sensitive, had occasionally severe mental disturbances and lived past 60 years on average, which is in accordance to the period in which they lived. The composers we considered worthy of special mention are Gesualdo, Corelli, Gretry, Wagner, Verdi and Britten.^{1,2,3}

CARLO GESUALDO DA VENOSA (1566–1613)

He was an Italian late Renaissance composer who was best known for his expressive madrigals and sacred music as well as a lute player and nobleman. However, he was also a murderer. As a part of his depressive disturbances throughout his life, he was often in conflict with his



Fig. 1. Gesualdo da Venosa

surroundings and he attempted suicide towards the end of his life due to his distraught. Because of his lack of social skills, he was drawn towards masochism, allowing himself to get whipped as it was the only way he could »discharge« his body. He was well known for his unusual sexual habits, sadomasochism and suppressed homosexuality. He died deeply depressed—most likely as a result of asthma that he suffered from, only three weeks after his only son. Literature also mentions the possibility that he was killed by his wife.^{4,5,6,7,8,9,10}

ARCANGELO CORELLI (1653–1713)

He was an Italian composer and violinist of the Baroque Era. Through a long list of functions and honors he reached the glory of the leading instrumental com-



Fig. 2. Arcangelo Corelli

poser in Italy. He was a modest and kind man of strong morals but also of frail health so he withdrew from social life most likely due to his long-term health difficulties, which resulted in decreasing of his opus. He suffered from nervous depression, anxiety and melancholy. He died at the age of 60 within three weeks after the onset of high fever and pneumonia.^{1,2,3,4,5,6,10}

**ANDRE ERNEST MODESTE
GRETRY**
(1741–1813)

He was a Belgian composer and musician as well as the most prominent representative of French opera comique of the 18th Century. As a man of frail health, he lived a relatively secluded life and he was deeply affected by the woman who cared for him the most. Over the last



Fig. 3. Andre Ernest Modeste Gretry

six years of his life, his health began to deteriorate rapidly. Tuberculosis was present in the history of his family and his daughters suffered from it. He managed to live to the age of 72 before the disease set in. He died under severe fever, aggressive coughing attacks and heavy bloody sputum, slightly dazed. Due to his well balanced life style and lean construction he lived to an old age.^{1,2,3,4,5,6,10}

RICHARD WAGNER
(1813–1883)

He is a well known German composer and writer, librettist of his own on-scene musical achievements. In his childhood, he got a rash on his face, mostly affecting the area around his mouth and eyes, with which he fought for the rest of his life. It is possible that this was erysipelas, though it was most likely an allergic dermatitis or recurrent erythema because the rash would pass spontaneously. He was relatively short, sturdy and stocky,



Fig. 4. Richard Wagner

but full of energy and with a wild temperament. He was also highly intelligent, ambitious but often egotistical, self-centered and hypochondriac. Already in his thirties, at times of great exhaustion and stress, he suffered from constipation and abdominal cramps. Besides that, he suffered from symptomatic hemorrhoids and it is considered that he suffered from irritable bowels syndrome, which he treated in spas and with opium. In 1839, a harmless infection of the upper respiratory tract rapidly progressed into a »thyroid fever«, following a long recovery. After his first wife, with whom he lived a lavish life above their means, he married the daughter of his close friend-Franz Liszt, with whom he had two children. From the letters addressed to Liszt, one can conclude that he was depressed and having frequent suicidal thoughts. He was strongly engaged in the revolution in 1848, after which he became extremely close with the Bavarian King Ludwig II who fully supported his artistic creations. In 1858 he got gastritis, followed by a painful ulcer that appeared on his leg and limited his daily work. The following year he suffered from a »brain fever« accompanied by headaches and hallucinations. As a result of this, his eyesight was damaged for several weeks. He was a cardiac patient for much of his life with frequent stenocardia, palpitations, syncope, shortness of breath and fatigued conditions. It is believed that he had a series of undiagnosed heart attacks. The

last heart attack occurred suddenly, making him suffer from profuse sweating and strong chest pains that were resistant to medications. He died shortly after this as there was nothing anyone could do. His creative opus was not completed even though he lived to be almost seventy.^{4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11}

GIUSEPPE VERDI

(1813–1901)

He was a talented and renowned Italian composer. He gained his undisputed international reputation due to his brilliant operas. Regardless of his poverty and the fact that he did not attend Music Academy, he became a favorite throughout Italy since he was so talented. His father could not afford him education, so he became more and more attached to his benefactor *Barezzi*, whose daughter he

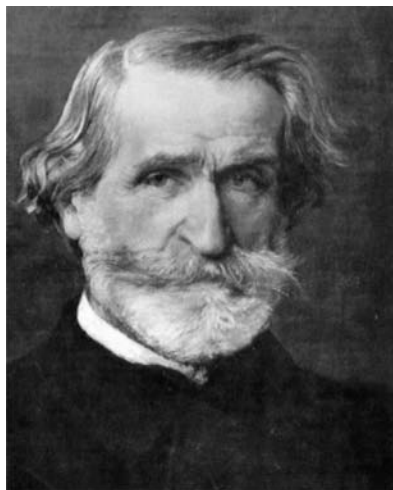


Fig. 5. Giuseppe Verdi

married later. But a great tragedy soon occurred, his wife died of meningitis, and his two infant children of common childhood digestive diseases of the time. This deeply affected Verdi. He lived a more reserved life style and was not prone to pompousness. Despite the fact that he was skinny and of frail build, he loved posing for portraits and he paid for his own monument. In general, he was a man of very strong will, hard-working, serious, independent, but also argumentative, with frequent outbreaks of anger. He went through several shorter or longer »writer's blocks« and was relatively slow in realizing new works. His second marriage was to a woman with whom he felt a strong connection from his thirties. He was generally healthy, with occasional prolonged headaches, accompanied with recurrent throat infections, nervous stomach disorders and progressively stronger rheumatism, i.e. atrophic difficulties of the spine and extremities. He was considered to be puny, and he needed medical assistance due to his somatic crises and chronic bronchitis. He later had frequent periods of dizziness, and almost lost his life due to a severe flu. Following the death of his second wife, he lived a secluded life. Towards the end of his life, he spent much of his time at spas, witnessing many of his contemporaries dying. At the end of 1901 he was found unconscious at the edge of his bed, with paralysis of the right extremities, although he was known to be in rela-

tively good health at this time. Despite the efforts of the best Italian doctors, he died just a week after this ordeal at the age of 88 due to massive bleeding in the internal capsule of the left cerebral hemisphere. He managed to finish his opus.
4,5,6,7,8,9,10,12

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–1976)

He was an English composer, pianist and conductor. As a baby, he contracted pneumonia from which he nearly lost his life, and it was then that a cardiac defect was detected – an aortic stenosis. At the age of 27, tonsillectomy was performed on him because of the delayed streptococcal infection, and two years later he contracted influenza and measles from which he was recovering for almost 2



Fig. 6. Edward Benjamin Britten

months. In 1966 he was hospitalized for colon resection because of diverticulitis, which was followed by a hernia operation. Despite all this, he was still actively composing. He collaborated with the poet Auden, and later with the tenor Peter Pears, with whom he was in an intimate relationship for 35 years. At the age of 55 he suddenly fell ill with what seemed to be the flu, only with higher fever and periods of delirium. At the hospital, it was established that he had bacterial endocarditis, and the source of the infection were most likely his rotten teeth. After receiving treatment with intravenous penicillin for a month, he was noticeably better for the next 5 years. However, following a routine medical examination it was discovered that his condition had progressed to aortic insufficiency. Due to this illness, he underwent catheterization and serious lengthy valvular heart surgery during which he had a stroke affecting his right extremities. He had difficulty walking, needed help with feeding, the weakness and clumsiness of his right hand made it hard for him to write music, he was disabled to play and conduct, so his public activity was reduced. Despite the operation, he was in poor condition, getting progressively weaker with time, losing the battle to survive. He died at the age of 63 due to deterioration of his basic heart disease. He died peacefully, surrounded by friends.^{4,5,6,7,8,9,10,13}

CONCLUSION

The composers mentioned above lived relatively long considering that their siblings (and fellow citizens) of that era were dying at half their age. In the earlier centuries the causes of death were usually infectious diseases-plague at first followed by tuberculosis (Gretry), etc.). In later centuries, thanks to better diagnosis, degenerative diseases were dominant (Wagner, Verdi, Britten).

BOLESTI I SUDBINE SKLADATELJA OBLJETNICE 2013.

Sažetak – Rijetke su slavljeničke godine s većim zbirom skladatelja. Osim 1985. godine (Bach, Haendel, D. Scarlatti), oko 2010. godine (Haydn, Schumann, Chopin), tu je i velika 2013. godina. Radilo se o vrlo osjetljivim skladateljima s povremenim jačim duševnim smetnjama koji su živjeli prosječno preko 60 godina, odgovarajuće s razdobljima u kojima su živjeli. Smatrali smo vrijednim da posebno iznesemo i izdvojimo Gesualda, Corellija, Gretrya, Wagnera, Verdija, Brittena. Navedeni skladatelji živjeli su relativno dugo s obzirom da su im braća (i sugrađani) toga doba umirali u ranijim stoljećima dvostruko ranije. Također su uzroci smrti u ranijim stoljećima više bile zarazne bolesti – isprva kuga, a kasnije tuberkuloza (Gretry), itd., a u daljim stoljećima, zahvaljujući i boljoj dijagnostici, prevladavale su razne degenerativne bolesti (Wagner, Verdi, Britten).

Ključne riječi: bolesti, skladatelji, Gesualdo, Corelli, Gretry, Wagner, Verdi, Britten

REFERENCES

1. Greene D.M. *Greene's Biographical Encyclopedia of Composers*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc; 1985.
2. O'Shea J. *Music and Medicine Medical Profiles of Great Composers*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.; 1990.
3. Schonberg H.C. *The Lives of the Great Composers*, 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company; 1997.
4. Breitenfeld T. *Neurološke i psihijatrijske bolesti skladatelja (magistarski rad)*. Zagreb: Stomatološki fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu; 2003.
5. Kerner D. *Krankheiten grosser Musiker*. Stuttgart: Schattauer; 1968.
6. Boehme G. *Medizinische Portraits Beruehmteter Komponisten*. Stuttgart; Fischer, 1981.
7. Neumayr A. *Musik und Medizi*. Wien: J&V.E; 1989.
8. Lange – Eichbaum W, Ritter W. *Genie, Irrsinn und Ruhm. Die komponisten*. Muenchen: Reinhardt; 1986.
9. Sadie S. *Grove. World Encyclopedia of Music*, London: McMillan; 1980.
10. Breitenfeld D, Breitenfeld T. *Bolesti i sudbine poznatih skladatelja*. Zagreb: Music Play; 2012.
11. Breitenfeld D, Bergovec Mi, Breitenfeld T, Bergovec Ma. *Richard Wagner (1813–1883); Psihogram i uzrok smrti*. *Liječničke novine* 2002.; 13/10: 56–7
12. Breitenfeld D, Demarin V, Breitenfeld T, Šerić V, Vargek – Solter V, Prstačić M. *Giuseppe Verdi – u povodu 100. godišnjice smrti*. *Liječničke novine* 2001; 3/12: 56–7
13. Breitenfeld D, Breitenfeld T. *Srčana bolest Edwarda Benjamina Brittena (1913–1976) – Liječničke novine* 2003; 5:39