

Medicines in the correspondence of the Mozart Family

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Summary

The most famous members of the Mozart family were musicians - not physicians. In spite of that, the family correspondence of the Mozarts contains much noteworthy information on 18th century medicine. It comes mainly from Leopold, the famous composer's father, which is why the vast majority of the medical data presented in the letters cannot be found in the popular editions of the correspondence. One of the medicine-related subjects usually omitted or presented briefly in such editions concerns the medicaments used in the Mozart family. Out of more than 100 remedies mentioned in the correspondence the article's author chose and described a few that seem to have played a particularly significant role in the life of the Mozart family.

Résumé

Les plus célèbres membres de la famille Mozart étaient des musiciens, non des médecins. Malgré cela, la correspondance familiale des Mozart mentionne beaucoup d'informations précieuses sur la médecine du XVIIIe siècle. Elles nous viennent surtout de Leopold, le père du célèbre compositeur, bien que dans la plupart des éditions populaires de la correspondance des membres de la famille Mozart les détails médicaux ne sont pas présentés. Un des sujets médicaux passé systématiquement sous silence ou présenté très brièvement est celui des médicaments utilisés par cette famille. Parmi plus de 100 médicaments cités dans les lettres, l'auteur de l'article a choisi un certain nombre, qui ont joué un rôle prépondérant dans la vie de la famille Mozart.

The most famous members of the Mozart family (1) earned their livings with music, not medicine; in fact, there had been no physicians among the ancestors and relatives of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Yet, documents, especially the letters left by the family, reveal much interesting information on 18th century medicine. Medical data contained in the family correspondence come mainly from the composer's father, Leopold (2); there are also several interesting medical letters written to Leopold by the authors from outside the family (3). Wolfgang referred to medical problems relatively seldom

(4). For this reason, a vast majority of medical information cannot be found in the popular editions of the Mozarts' correspondence, which are aimed at readers interested in music and are focused on the letters written by the famous composer. One of the subjects commonly omitted or presented very briefly in such editions considers medicines used by the Mozarts. However, there are several complete publications of the correspondence, the most important being the critical edition of the entire epistolary legacy of the Mozart family, printed under the auspices of the International Foundation Mozarteum of Salzburg (5).

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There are 103 different medicines named in the correspondence, some of them being mentioned many times. Among them, we find

the references to over 30 therapeutic plants, four simples of animal origin and about 40 compound medicines. In addition, Leopold's letters contain 22 detailed recipes of remedies prescribed for him or his children during the family's artistic journeys (6). Detailed analysis of all these remedies would take a considerably thick book. In this paper, I would like to focus on a few medicines, which seem to have played a particularly important role in the life of the Mozart family.

Identifying the remedies referred to in the correspondence of the Mozarts is not always an easy task. First of all, their names often have little to do with the ingredients they were made of. Secondly, the 18th century pharmacy used nomenclature based on alchemy. To a great extent, the alchemic terminology has become extinct and its translation into the language of modern chemistry or pharmacy is sometimes very difficult. On the other hand, some of these terms and names have survived, but their meanings have changed. Thirdly, several prescriptions quoted by Leopold and from Salzburg doctors were written with the use of alchemic symbols, the meaning of which had been continually changing and was not uniform throughout Europe. (When suffering from a serious illness in London, Leopold had to ask his friend in Salzburg to consult a doctor and send him the needed prescriptions written in full text, because the local apothecaries could not decipher the alchemic code). Finally, the pharmaceutical market in Europe of that time was far from homogenous: medicines popular in the southern German lands and present in the pharmacopoeias of this region were often completely unknown somewhere else (7).

Different drug registers could also give varying recipes for a medicine known under a specific name. Nevertheless, the majority of medicines mentioned frequently in the correspondence can be found both in the 18th century medical manuals and in the most popular drug registers

coming from the southern German regions: the *Augsburg Pharmacopoeia* (8), the *Mannheim Dispensatory* (9) and several variations of the Viennese pharmacopoeias (10).

Diet was one of the most important aspects of any therapy of that time. Some types of food were credited with healing properties equal to those of regular medicines; certain groceries were given to the sick and convalescent exclusively. Leopold regularly discussed the questions of a proper diet with his children, advising them which foods and drinks would suit their temperaments or improve their health. In the Mozart family, an everyday food supply was rather modest, with frequent fast days kept meticulously. In illness, severe dietary restrictions were common, although in some cases doctors recommended rich, nutritious meals (11). During convalescence, a special diet played an even more important role. According to Leopold, the menu of a convalescent patient had to include meals based on barley or rice gruel, and, particularly, sago (a kind of groats made of a grated trunk core of a sago palm, *Cycas circinalis*). In the Mozart family, the latter seems to have been used as a remedy only (12). Barley and rice, boiled into gruel were to moisturise and strengthen breasts affected with disease. Baked apples and lightly boiled carrots had similar properties. Also delicate meat, like veal or lamb (Leopold recommended the lungs as particularly healthy) was an important element of a strengthening diet (13). As to the therapeutic drinks, the most popular one was barley water: a stock of a brewery barley boiled with a liquorice root, anise and marshmallow root (14). Such a beverage was not only recommended in «breast affections» and other ailments, but used to feed infants as well (15). Another highly valued product was whey, a drink based on which was the main remedy prescribed for Leopold during his last illness, diagnosed as «spleen occlusion» (16).

According to the humoral theory, bad quality or improper proportions of bodily liquids were

regarded as the most basic causes of illness. The best way to prevent such pathologies was frequent elimination of the spoiled or superfluous humors, and for this reason, purgative remedies appear so regularly in the correspondence of the Mozarts. Commonly, the Mozarts started the purgative therapy with rhubarb, in the form of a powder, electuary or tincture (the latter being a non-alcoholic rhubarb infusion with the addition of wine-stone). However, the most effective remedy of this kind, according to Leopold, was the Viennese laxative water (17), a recipe which we can find in the Viennese drug registers (18). It consisted of senna leaves, wine-stone cream (*cremor tartans*) and Calabrian manna (that is, a solidified juice from the ash-tree); additionally, the *Austrian-Viennese Dispensatory* demanded Corinthian raisins, oaken polypody root and coriander seeds, while the *Austrian Provincial Pharmacopoeia* required star anise. The list of ingredients leaves no doubt that the Viennese laxative water deserved its name.

The medicines used most regularly by the Mozarts belonged to another group of drugs - the antispasmodic remedies. In modern pharmacology this term defines medicines which lower a pathologically high tension of the soft muscle fibres. 250 years ago its meaning was much wider and not as well defined. At that time, structural and functional differences between tissues (and in fact, the very notion of tissue as well) were still unclear. A spasm was usually defined as a result of a violent constriction of a whole body part or organ, in particular of muscles and nerves. Therefore, a very wide range of pathologies, including headache, toothache, colic pains, coughing, different types of skin eruptions, epilepsy, nightmares and many others, was believed to originate from a spasm of some kind (19). Antispasmodic properties were ascribed to a no less diverse range of simple and compound medicaments.

The antispasmodic medicine the Mozarts used most frequently was the black powder,

present in the Viennese (20) and Mannheim (21) drug registers under the Latin name *pulvis epilepticus niger*. Apart from the different proportions of the ingredients, both dispensatories give almost an identical recipe for this medicine. It consisted of peony seeds and root (the latter being the basic ingredient of all epileptic powders), dittany root, eagle-wood, oaken mistletoe (since antiquity, mistletoe growing on an oak had been believed to possess special medical properties, but in the 18th century some writers were questioning this belief (22)). It also included red coral, white amber, sea unicorn (that is, narwhal's tusk) and linden charcoal, which gave the medicine its characteristic colour and name. Additionally, the Mannheim recipe required elk's hoof and mother of pearl. In the Viennese recipe, we find prepared pearls and 50 flakes of pure gold, the latter added after exact powderizing and mixing of other ingredients.

The black powder, mentioned 13 times in the correspondence (23), was recommended for epilepsy, convulsions, colic pains, nightmares, sudden fear and others similar cases. The Mozarts used it mainly as a remedy against fever - in 18th century medicine this term meant shivers. According to Leopold, the black powder could not decrease pathological body heat. In illness with a high temperature, he recommended another epileptic medicine - the margrave powder (24). This then widely known and popular remedy appeared in the Augsburg (25) and Viennese (26) pharmacopoeias and was recommended for apoplexy, epilepsy and nightmares, but also for «malign fevers», smallpox and chickenpox. According to the above pharmacopoeias, the margrave powder corrected improper brain humidity and drove a «corrupted» sweat away. The remedy's discovery is widely - and wrongly - attributed to the German chemist Andreas Sigismund Marggraf (1709-1782); the *markgrafen pulver* had been known and widely recommended long before his birth (27). Most probably, the remedy's name derived from its high price : apart from the recipe given in the

Tab. 1 Differences in the composition of the margrave powder

Disp. pharm. A – V	Pharm. Augustana	Pharm. Öst. Prov.
	Peony root	
	Oaken mistletoe	
	Deer's horn	
-	Red coral	
White coral		-
-		Dittany root
Ivory		-
Elk's hoof		-
<i>Spodium praeeparatum</i> (28)		-
Pearls		Mother of pearl or oyster shells
200 flakes of gold	20 flakes of gold	-

Pharmakopode Österreichische Provinzial, the margrave powder included considerable amounts of precious ingredients, like pure gold, pearls and ivory. *The Augsburg Pharmacopoeia* and the *Austrian - Viennese Dispensatory* give similar recipes for the drug, while the recipe printed in *the Austrian Provincial Pharmacopoeia* is comparatively less compound. Again, the recipe is based on peony root, oaken mistletoe and deer's horn (see Tab.1).

At the time when the Mozarts wrote their letters, medicine was approaching a critical point in its history. The rapid development of clinical medicine and the spectacular proceedings in the natural sciences that took place in the late 18th century, resulted in a constantly growing mistrust in the ages-old theories - a mistrust, which ended with therapeutical nihilism of the new Viennese clinical school led by Skoda and Rokitansky. Within a decade after Leopold's death in 1787 and his son's decease in 1791, an overwhelming majority of medicines mentioned in the correspondence of the Mozarts disappeared from the drug registers (29). After a reign of centuries, the old medicine finally came to a close.

Notes and references

1. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), his father Leopold (1719-1787), mother Maria Anna (1720-1778) and sister Maria Anna, called Nannerl (1751-1829).
2. Leopold's most interesting letters concerning medical subjects come from two periods. The first is the childhood of Wolfgang and Nannerl, filled with numerous artistic tours throughout Europe; particularly the letters written during the great European tour (1764-67) contain much fascinating medical information. The other group of Leopold's medical letters was written to his daughter in the years 1785 -87, when he took care of her little son.
3. Among them, a remarkable letter written on 29th May 1787 by Leopold's friend Theobald Marchand of Munich, with a description of an alternative treatment for Leopold's lethal disease (MBA: 1052; see Note 5).
4. Wolfgang's few letters containing noteworthy medical information come mainly from the time of his gradual emancipation from his father's influence (1777 - early 1780s); the most interesting of them concern the circumstances of the fatal illness of his mother in Paris (1778), and his views on the best methods of infant feeding.

5. W. A. Bayer, O. E. Deutsch, J. H. Eibl (eds.): *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*. Kassel, 1962-1975. Volumes I - IV contain the original texts; volumes V - VII : commentary and indexes. In further references to that publication in this article: *MBA*: number of the letter (place and date of origin).
6. *MBA*: 34 (Vienna, 30th Oct. 1762) - 1 prescription for Wolfgang; *MBA*: 92 (London, 13th Sept. 1764) - 6 prescriptions for Leopold and 5 Salzburg recipes (see further text); *MBA*: 103 (the Hague, 5th Nov. 1765) - 5 prescriptions for Nannerl; *MSA* 104 (the Hague, 12th Dec. 1765) - 4 prescriptions for Wolfgang; *MBA*: 121 (Olmütz, 10th Nov. 1767) - 2 prescriptions for Wolfgang.
7. The Mozarts faced the consequences of this situation at least twice. During his illness in London, Leopold could not get the remedies he needed because the apothecary did not know how to prepare them - they were not present in the local drug registers (*MBA*: 92, 13th Sept. 1764). Twenty four years later in Paris, Wolfgang was not able to buy the black powder, one of the most frequently used medicines in his family, because the apothecary he turned to did not know this remedy (*MBA*: 447, 1st May 1778; *MSA* 458, 3rd Jul. 1778).
8. *Pharmacopoea Augustana renovata, revisa et appendice aliquot medicamentorum selectorum aucta*. Out of many editions available in Polish libraries, I focused on the 1732 version, as the closest to the times of the correspondence. In further references: *Pharm. Augustana*.
9. *Dispensatorium medico - pharmaceuticum, jussu clementissimo Serenissimae Potentissimi Principis Electoris Caroli Theodori (...) in lucem emissum a Concilio Medico Electorali Palatino*. Mannheim, 1764. It seems to have been based on the *Dispensatorium pharmaceuticum Austriaco - Viennense* (see Note 10). In further references: *Disp. Mannh.*
10. *Dispensatorium pharmaceuticum Austriaco - Viennense cum Sacrae Caesaris Regiae Catholicae Maiestatis privilegio, sumtibus Collegii Pharmaceutici Viennensis*. I studied the editions coming from the years 1737, 1751 (both being the reprints of the 1729 edition), 1763 and 1770. In further references: *Disp. pharm. A - I* (the year of edition). *Pharmacopoea Oesterreichische Provinzial*, Vienna 1776. This publication was printed in German and contained mostly the prescriptions given in the above *Dispensatorium*. In further references: *Pharm. Ost. Prov.* Interestingly enough, the Latin version of this book (*Pharmacopoea Austriaco - Provincialis*; the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow possesses its exemplar from the year 1774) is not homogenous with the German edition.
11. See *MBA*: 103 (the Hague, 5th Nov. 1765), in which an almost fatal illness of Nannerl's is described. Nannerl's first doctor prescribed her a scarce diet, consisting mainly of salted water mixed with milk. Leopold neither agreed with the doctor's diagnosis, nor accepted the treatment suggested. Another doctor he asked for help changed the treatment and ordered a rich, nutritious diet. During Leopold's last disease, his doctor forbade him to partake of the fasting ritual and recommended a meat-rich diet (see *MBA*: 1010, Salzburg, 8th Dec. 1786).
12. *MBA*: 342 (Munich, 2nd Oct. 1777); *MBA*: 344 (Salzburg, 6th Oct. 1777); *MBA*: 346 (Salzburg, 12th Oct. 1777); *MBA*: 1011 (Salzburg, 14th Dec. 1786); *MBA*: 1015 (Salzburg, 29th Dec. 1786). The first three letters describe Leopold's recovery from « breast affection » after introducing sago to his diet. In the latter two letters, Leopold writes to his daughter about his plans to use sago as a remedy against weight loss and weakness.
13. *MBA*: 553 (Salzburg, 4th Dec. 1780). The letter, written to Wolfgang and filled with numerous medical advice and recommendations concerning a cold he had caught in Munich while working on his opera «Idomeneo, Re di Creta», ended with a humorous signature: «*Ita clarissimus Dominus Doctor Leopoldus Mozartus*».
14. *MBA*: 553 (Salzburg, 4th Dec. 1780).
15. *MBA*: 752 (Vienna, 18th Jun. 1783)
16. *MBA*: 1048 (Salzburg, 10th May 1787); *MBA*: 1052 (Munich, 29th May 1787). This diagnosis is one of the very few appearing in the correspondence that can be easily and reliably translated into the modern medical language. The symptoms Leopold complained of (sudden, severe pain in the chest, occurring during physical exercises, e.g. climbing the stairs, or after

- exposure to cold air) today would be diagnosed as ischaemic heart disease.
17. In the correspondence, the Viennese laxative water appears as both an individual medication and an ingredient of another compound medicine. See MBA: 81 (Paris, 22nd Feb. 1764); MBA: 92 (London, 13th Sept. 1764).
 18. *Disp. pharm. A - V*, 1737, p. 52: *Infusum sive aqua laxativa. Pharm. Ost. Prov.*, p. 229 - 230: *Infusum sive aqua laxativa / Purgiraußguß oder Wienerisches Laxiertrankchen.*
 19. Christoph Heinrich Bauer : *Dissertatio inauguralis medica de specificis antispasmodicis (...)*, Halae Magdeburgiae 1702. Jagiellonian Library, Cracow, signature: *Medicina 10.845.*
 20. *Disp. pharm A - V*, 1737, p. 163 -164; all editions I have studied contain this prescription.
 21. *Disp. Mannh.*, p. 131
 22. Krzysztof Kluk: *Dykcyonarzroslinny*[Dictionary of plants], Warszawa 1786-1788, vol. 3, p. 165.
 23. MBA: 34 (Vienna, 30th Oct. 1762); MBA: 104 (the Hague, 12th Dec. 1765); MBA: 121 (Olmütz, 10th Nov. 1767); MBA: 254 (Milan, 2nd Nov. 1771); MBA: 428 (Mannheim, 22nd Feb. 1778); MBA: 433 (Salzburg, 28th Feb. h 3rd Mar. 1778); MBA: 447 (Paris, 1st May 1778); MBA: 448 (Salzburg, 11th May 1778); MBA: 458 (Paris 3rd Jul. 1778); MBA: 467 (Paris, 20th Jul. 1778); MBA: 471 (Paris, 31st Jul. 1778); MBA: 543 (Salzburg, 25th Nov. 1780); MBA: 553 (Salzburg, 4th Dec. 1780).
 24. The margrave powder appears in five letters: MBA: 34 (Vienna, 30th Oct. 1762); MBA: 104 (the Hague, 12th Dec. 1765); MBA: 121 (Olmütz, 10th Nov. 1767); MBA: 543 (Salzburg, 25th Nov. 1780) and MBA: 553 (Salzburg, 4th Dec. 1780). In the latter, Leopold wrote to his son: «(...) du kanst, wenn du keine Erhitzung hast, ein wenig Schwarzes Pulverallein nehmen, das margrafen Pulver ist nur, wenn man erhitzt ist.
 25. *Pharm. Augustana*, p. 100: *Pulvis marchionis seu epilepticus.*
 26. *Disp. pharm. A - V*, 1737, p. 163: *Pulvis epilepticus marchionis. Pharm. Ost. Prov.*, p. 288: *Pulvis marchionis / Markgrafepulver.*
 27. In English editions of the correspondence the medicine's name is translated into «margrave powder», but the discovery of the drug is attributed to Marggraf (see E. Dickinson (transl.): *The Letters of Mozart and his Family*, 3rd ed., p. 9, note 2). In the Polish translation we find «Marggraf is powder». Most probably, the source of this mistake is the commentary to the critical edition (unfortunately, as no library in Poland has the commentary volumes, I am not able to confirm it), and comes from the confusing similarity of the famous chemist's name to the German name of the powder. In fact, *Pulvis marchionis* appeared in all 17th century editions of the Augsburg Pharmacopoeia, from the year 1610 on. A short reference to this medicament can also be found in Bauer's *Dissertatio* (see Note 11), printed 7 years before Marggrafs birth.
 28. *Spodium praeparatum* meant «a metallic ash», nowadays usually interpreted as a metal oxide.
 29. *Pharmacopoea Austriaco - Castrensis. Ad mandatum et cum Privilegio S. C. Ft. Apost. Majestatis (...)* Vienna 1795. Apart from *Spiritus Mindereri*, occurring in one of the prescriptions quoted by Leopold (MBA: 92, London 13th Sept. 1764), no compound medicine mentioned in the correspondence appears in this register. In the *Pharmacopoea Austriaca, editio altera, emendata*, Vienna 1814, we find only the above *Spiritus Mindereri* and the Viennese laxative water.

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Biography

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