

How Neurosyphilis Affected Four 19th Century Musical Composers and Their Works

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The purpose of this research was to better understand how neurological disorders affect the creative process. Robert Schumann, Bedrich Smetana, Hugo Wolf, and Gaetano Donizetti were all 19th century composers who most scholars concur had neurosyphilis throughout at least the latter half of their lives.^{1, 2, 3, 4} Each of these composers wrote pieces consistently throughout their physical decline, with noticeable differences in quality of work possibly due to their neurological state.

Neurosyphilis was more commonly spread in the 19th century than it is today. When syphilis is left untreated, the illness travels to the brain and presents symptoms similar to bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. As the syphilis reaches the central nervous system, an individual will begin showing psychotic symptoms that slowly increase in severity until ultimately their body shuts down from the illness, or their mental degradation pushes them to end their life prematurely.

The four composers analyzed in this study encountered syphilis after their musical career began and continued to compose through the worsening symptoms of neurosyphilis. General biographical information regarding their musical training and compositional careers were analyzed, alongside their personal and medical decline, as recorded in personal journals and letters to acquaintances.

After a timeline was created for each composer, compositions were chosen before and after a neurosyphilis diagnosis. Because syphilis was an illness accompanied by social stigma and many hid their plight, the second composition for each composer was taken as late in their life as possible while maintaining the authenticity of the composer's ability to communicate musically (Table A).

This research was primitive compared to the depth of knowledge accessible about these composers, their condition, and their musical works. While changes in

complexity were found in the later works for each composer, no definitive conclusions were reached about the direct impact syphilis had on the decline in quality of work. Future research should do a deeper musical analysis of the works to see if the composer's stylistic choices or chord complexity changed throughout their mental decline, or only at the end of their lives. This research could help redefine the mental ability of those with psychotic symptoms, rather than the focus being on inability. These composers were writing musical pieces against doctor's orders, while in insane asylums, and many of their works were left unfinished. Music is a form of communication and better understanding a composer's mental decline may open new outlets for nonverbal psychotic conditions to this day.

Statment of Research Advisor

The research done indicates that these composers developed the skills and abilities to harness their creativity in the early stages of their careers. It also indicated that these skill sets were not significantly affected by the disease. However, the mental processes of creativity changed, allowing these composers to alter or even disregard the music norms of the era, including form, harmonic choice, and melodic invention. Further understanding of this separation of specific technical skill sets from creativity would assist in the treatment and rehabilitation of patients suffering from this disease, as well as other smilar diseases, by engaging in similar creative and learning activities and incorporating them into treatment. The study was focused on four prominent romantic composers, whose technical and creative skills are recognized to be of the highest caliber.

—Michael Pendowski, *Music*

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TABLE A. Compositions for each composer chosen before and after neurosyphilis diagnosis.

Composer	Born	First Composition	First recorded Syphilis symptom	Second composition	Death
Robert Schumann	June 8, 1810 ⁵	<i>Abegg Variations</i> for piano (1831) ⁶	1830/1831 ^{7*}	<i>Geistervariationen</i> (1854) ⁸	July 29, 1856 ⁹
Bedrich Smetana	March 2, 1824 ⁹	<i>Klavirni Trio</i> (1855) ⁹	1861/1862 ^{10, 11}	<i>String Quartet No. 2 in D Minor</i> (1883) ^{10, 12}	May 12, 1884 ¹⁰
Hugo Wolf	March 13, 1860 ¹³	<i>Penthesilea</i> (1883-1885) ¹¹	1878 ⁴	<i>Michelangelo sonnets</i> (1897) ⁴	February 22, 1903 ¹³
Gaetano Donizetti	1797 ¹⁴	<i>Zoraide di Granata</i> (1822) ³	1824/ 1828 ^{10, 3}	<i>Caterina Cornaro</i> (1844) ¹⁰	1848 ¹⁴

*I rationalized using the *Abegg Variations* as a piece before Schumann's syphilis because of how subtle his first symptoms were and how prolonged his condition lasted.