

This article was downloaded by:

On: 24 January 2011

Access details: *Access Details: Free Access*

Publisher *Taylor & Francis*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Macromolecular Science, Part A

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713597274>

Asthma and Human Excellence: A Coincidence or a Correlation?

Constantine John Falliers^a

^a Allergy & Asthma Clinic, P.C. University of Colorado School of Medicine Denver, Denver, Colorado

To cite this Article Falliers, Constantine John(1989) 'Asthma and Human Excellence: A Coincidence or a Correlation?', Journal of Macromolecular Science, Part A, 26: 8, 1271 – 1278

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/00222338908052046

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00222338908052046>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

ASTHMA AND HUMAN EXCELLENCE: A COINCIDENCE OR A CORRELATION?

CONSTANTINE JOHN FALLIERS*

Allergy & Asthma Clinic, P.C.
University of Colorado School of Medicine, Denver
Denver, Colorado 80206

INTRODUCTION

Superior intelligence, creative genius, extraordinary personality, and/or social prominence have been associated with asthma often enough to raise the question of a nonrandom concurrence. With no intent to prove any developmental correlation, this article presents such "case reports" (more biographical than biological) for two main reasons: to document the experience of asthma in the life of outstanding persons and to make everyone better acquainted—using asthma as an "excuse"—with the work and the times of some unique human beings.

The Roman leader and stoic philosopher, Seneca, was the first historical person known to have suffered (quite severely) from asthma [1]. A Byzantine princess, the young mistress of emperor Constantine IX, died of asthma in 1044 AD [2]. Several prominent physicians in the past 300 years themselves had asthma. In the 20th century, asthma has been a medical problem of United States presidents (Theodore Roosevelt), authors, actors, athletes, and millions of people, young and old, many of whom have achieved, or may attain, "excellence." The present article, prepared in honor of Dr. Maurits Dekker, Chairman of the Board of Marcel Dekker, Inc.—publisher of the *Journal of Asthma*—is based on the series in this medical journal reviewing the illness and the extraordinary accomplishments of the famous French author of *A la Recherche du Temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*)

*Editor, *Journal of Asthma*, 1981-1988.

and of the prominent members of the “Second Viennese School” of composers, one of whom, Arnold Schoenberg, ended his life in Southern California a little over 30 years ago [3, 4].

THE MANY MALADIES AND THE LITERARY GENIUS OF MARCEL PROUST (1871-1922)

“Asthma and neurasthenia and sexual deviation are common maladies, but what have they to do with genius? Did these maladies spur Proust on to greatness or did Proust achieve greatness despite them?”

With this challenging question, Dr. Bernard Straus introduces the reader of his elegant and objective treatise *Maladies of Marcel Proust* [5] to the life and work of an outstanding French turn-of-the-century literary figure. Although the above question remains unanswered in Straus’ book, which features asthma prominently, the documentation and analysis of writing, suffering, and the multiple personal interactions within a unique family and social milieu are fascinating, instructive, and illuminating.

The “greatness” of this “querulous asthmatic” [5] was his ability to express with exquisite literary artistry the deepest insight into disturbing, although refined, human situations and emotions, at a time (the end of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the 20th century) and place (Paris and satellite locations in France) in which society was characterized by intensely conflicting values, overwhelming social aspirations and flux, and affected life-styles. These qualities were reflected in Proust, whose intellectual inquisitiveness only partly compensated for existential uncertainties.

Of course, none of the voluminous biographies nor any detailed “clinical profile” of this famous *malade* can provide the key to full recognition of the value of his work. Nevertheless, by knowing a little more about the *person*, we may develop a level of acquaintance that may help explain the genesis and the evolution of the author’s opus.

Marcel Proust was born in Paris, France, on July 10, 1871, the son of Dr. Achille-Adrien Proust and Jeanne-Clémence Weil. He was baptized Catholic but was half-Jewish on his mother’s side and both cultural and religious influences appear strong—in their positive as well as negative imperatives—in his life and work.

The young Marcel was “sickly and weak” [5]. A diagnosis of asthma was made when he was 9 years old, and he suffered from it the rest of his life. He died on November 18, 1922, with pneumonia and probably of a ruptured lung abscess. His chronic asthma, erratic self-medication, and strikingly ab-

normal sleep and eating habits may have been contributory factors. Proust also suffered from allergic rhinitis and seemed to have been sensitive to many things, including flowers, seasonal pollen, foods, and medicaments. A vivid medical portrait of Proust, the neurotic, asthmatic, self-centered genius, is painted by Dr. Straus [5] and especially by Marcel himself in his letters to his mother, which he often wrote daily, even while they resided in the same place.

As the author and attentive anthologist of Proust's letters indicates, "Physicians have always learned from patients" [5]. Besides, according to the famous clinical physiologist, Claude Bernard, as quoted by Dr. Straus, "There are no illnesses; only ill persons" [5]. If we include among these "*malades*" the perennial asthmatic Marcel Proust, it is because, after recognizing his ailments, we want to dismiss them! If time was his preoccupation, so it is for almost everyone. He describes art as the "preserver of memory" and memory as the "preserver of time" [5]. While we are still searching for means to understand and prevent or cure asthma, we remain profoundly concerned with the meaning and the beauty of existence. The author of *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* (poorly translated and published as *Pleasures and Regrets* [6]), even though a "night person" and facing the eternal night like all of us, tells us of the pleasure of each day, a *jour* of joyful journeys, regardless of maladies and possible only through art.

THE BRILLIANT SERIAL COMPOSITIONS AND THE BAFFLING SERIOUS ASTHMA OF SCHOENBERG AND BERG

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Two of the greatest composers of the 20th century, Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, are still considered "ultramodern," profoundly innovative, and generally difficult to understand by many people. Yet they spent their lives partly in another century and, mostly, in another world [7]. These musical geniuses were two of the three leading members of the so-called "Second Vienna School" of composers and, intriguingly, they both (an incidence of 66% in that group!) had asthma.

Arnold Schoenberg (he changed his original Germanic spelling of Schönberg permanently when he emigrated to the United States) was born in Vienna, the capital of the outwardly peaceful and paternalistic but inherently turbulent multiethnic Hapsburg empire, on September 13, 1874. His family was Jewish and originated from the part of the empire that became Czechoslovakia after

the first World War. Neither extraordinary musical talent nor a tendency toward respiratory problems, such as asthma, was noted in the immediate family members. However, the study of music, languages, and literature and a general interest in cultural values were part of the family tradition. Arnold started violin lessons when he was 8 years old and soon afterward began to compose some relatively light tunes and take part in amateur group performances. His ensuing youthful musical, poetic, and intellectual interests were typical of that period [7]. The exceptional analytical talents of the young Schoenberg became evident when he and some friends began to explore and experiment with musical material they heard in performances of Richard Wagner's *Tristan* in Vienna. It is an early characteristic of the broad and intellectually penetrating mentality of Schoenberg that, unlike most of his contemporaries, he was able to integrate the richly chromatic lyrical "eroticism" of Wagner with the intellectual "conservatism" of Brahms and felt no need to become an adherent of the one and an opponent of the other. Later, when he pursued his own original and "revolutionary" paths, Schoenberg was thought by some to be simply an "irresponsible innovator," but there is abundant evidence that, even from these early years, creative consistency, intellectual honesty, and diligent precision were his unflinching virtues.

By the time Schoenberg composed one of his currently better-known works, the *Transfigured Night* (*Verklärte Nacht*), he had "taken the first steps in the development . . . that was to lead him to abandon triadic harmony and tonality itself by 1908" [7]. This string sextet was arranged for orchestra in 1917, and a second version, from 1943, is the one generally known today. Another composition of the early phase of the composer's creativity, based on the romantic love story of *Pelleas and Mélisande* (which also inspired other famous compositions by Fauré, Debussy, and Sibelius), was performed in Vienna during the 1904-1905 season, but the reception of the audience was "cool" and even the orchestra felt "ill at ease." Worse was to come! On February 5, 1907, the first performance of Schoenberg's string quartet caused a musical "scandal" that is best described by one who was present, Alma Mahler, wife of the famous composer and conductor.

Regardless of public reactions, the years 1907-1911 were extremely significant in Schoenberg's career as a composer and musical theorist. A series of works during that period marks the transition from the "last frontiers of tonality" to the "atonality"—which the composer and others preferred to call "pantonicity"—and these were surpassed only in the final systematized synthesis of the serial, or tone-row, system about 10 years later [8]. In addition, Schoenberg wrote a profound book (not as "revolutionary" as it was thought) on the study of harmony. Also, being multitalented, he painted many canvases that were exhibited in several prominent galleries. One of the most out-

standing musical works was the unique monodrama (an opera for one performer) entitled *Erwartung* (translated in English as *expectation* or *awaiting*). The plot is Schoenberg's own and describes a young woman's search for her lost lover, who is then found dead in a forest.* It was with the world premiere of *Erwartung* in Prague on June 6, 1924, and with a number of other successful performances that, for a few years, it appeared that "the fortunes of the new Viennese school might rise steadily." Sadly, this did not prove to be the case.

Retracing now the World War I years from the medical point of view, we note that in May 1915 Schoenberg was examined in Vienna for the army reserves and was rejected due to the incidental finding of what appeared to be a goiter. After much hesitation, he and his family moved to a rent-free house offered by a patron, but later a second medical examination reversed the earlier diagnosis and Schoenberg joined the reserve army in December 1915. His health, however, deteriorated under the strain of military training and "he began to suffer from asthma, to which he was subject all his life" [7]. Friends tried to secure his release, which was obtained in October 1916. Due to serious financial difficulties, Schoenberg and his family then had to move from one cheap apartment or boarding house to another. A brighter period followed between February 1919 and the end of 1921, thanks to the activities of the newly founded Society for Private Musical Performances. There were numerous concerts, well received by this select group of musical initiates and adherents. The rampant inflation of the ensuing years put an end to the Society's activities. Later, in October 1923, Schoenberg's first wife died, and the following year, just before his 50th birthday, Schoenberg remarried. Two of the three offspring of this marriage he called his "American family" as they were born after he emigrated to the United States. The first child, his daughter Nuria, was born in Barcelona in 1932, and she further expanded the musical prominence of the family by marrying the Italian composer Luigi Nono.

Schoenberg had to relocate twice because of his asthma. In the winter of 1931-1932 he moved from Berlin (where he had accepted a position in the Prussian Academy) to the warmer climate of Barcelona, Spain. After his emigration to the United States in October 1933, the cold winter in Boston was

*The metaphor of a "dead body" as the ultimate finding of an intense search has been applied also to current research in the field of asthma [9]. Despite expanding knowledge, the morbidity and mortality associated with asthma continue to increase [10].

again associated with serious respiratory difficulty, and the Schoenberg family moved to Los Angeles in the fall of 1934. This “probably added several years to his life” [7].

In 1936 Schoenberg accepted a professorship at the University of California. Many outstanding compositions, including the *Fourth Quarter* and the *Violin Concerto*, were completed that year. A number of others followed, and he also began works on Biblical themes, some of which were left incomplete. In August 1946, after returning from a series of lectures in Chicago, he suffered an almost fatal “heart attack.” This experience of “close encounter” with death is reflected in his magnificent string trio, composed after his recovery. Another of his theoretical works, consisting of a selection of essays and critical articles, was published a few years later under the title *Style and Idea*.

In 1951 Schoenberg received an additional and very meaningful recognition when he was elected honorary president of the Academy of Music of the newly created State of Israel. He died in Los Angeles on July 13, 1951, having been predeceased by his two younger disciples, Alban Berg and Anton Webern.

Alban Berg (1885-1935)

Alban M. J. Berg was born in Vienna on February 9, 1885, a little over 20 years after the birth of Arnold Schoenberg. He was the son of devout Catholic parents, whose influence can be detected in the strong mystical trends in his character and his work [7]. He lived in this capital of Austria—and of the world of music for over 200 years—all his life. But every year he also spent some time in the Carinthian Alps at his family estate, or at the home of his wife’s family and in the “Waldhaus” by Lake Worther that he had bought in spite of his financial difficulties. Berg had no significant musical training until he met Schoenberg in 1904, who, considering the young man’s talent and his inability to pay, accepted him as a pupil at no charge [7]. The early loss of his father also made young Alban look on Schoenberg as a surrogate father, as well as a composition teacher, model, and mentor. The contrast between the “complacent conservatism of Viennese culture” and pathbreaking intellectuals in all fields (music, literature, painting, mathematics, philosophy, psychoanalysis) was even more pronounced during young Berg’s school years than it was during Schoenberg’s. The young composer’s original and personal style, which qualifies him not simply as a disciple but as a colleague of his master Schoenberg, is noted with the string quartet *Opus 3* of 1910, which is characterized by a “brilliant and imaginative expansion of the idiomatic sonic resources of the medium” [7]. After Schoenberg left Vienna for his second stay in Berlin, Berg composed his brief and “aphoristic” orchestral songs on *Postcard Themes*

by *Peter Altenberg*. Two of these songs were included in a concert that Schoenberg conducted in Vienna on March 31, 1913, which provoked such a hostile disturbance in the audience that the performance could not be continued. An early interest and involvement with the 12-tone composition system (dodecaphonic) is evident in Berg's first opera, *Wozzeck*, based on a play by the same title. Both this and his later opera *Lulu* follow the precedent of Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* by integrating within a large-scale musical design individual numbers that remain self-contained despite multiple thematic interrelations and cross references.

One month after the unsuccessful performance of his string quartet, in May 1911, Berg married Helene Nahowski, with whom he had fallen deeply in love when they first met 4 years earlier. According to his biographers, Berg had suffered his first attack of asthma also in that year. He remained an "asthmatic" the rest of his life [7]. In addition, he was prone to recurrent skin abscesses, and this eventually led to his premature death from generalized septicemia in 1935.

Despite all the serious problems in his life, health, and career, Alban Berg continued to have the appearance of "eternal youth" with a "boyish--almost feminine beauty." Yet unquestionably he experienced intense physical and mental anguish ever since his late adolescence, when a failure at his school's matriculation examinations combined with a deep amorous passion led him to consider suicide. It has been stated that his "bodily impairment determined the characteristics of his artistic routine," as shown by the fact that he never appeared on the podium as a conductor or soloist, in contrast to his musical colleagues Schoenberg and Webern. Two major medical problems, asthma and a tendency for recurring abscess formation, were noted soon after his 20th birthday, probably in about 1907.

By the time he completed his opera *Wozzeck*, Berg's asthma was aggravated by "hay fever" and he often spent the night sitting by the side of his bed "struggling for air." When he completed his *Lyric Suite* in 1927 he was describing himself as being still "very sick, unable to work." In August 1935, following multiple wasp stings, he developed persistent abscesses that failed to heal. Although very sick, he completed his *Violin Concerto*, which was commissioned as a memorial to the 20-year-old daughter of Alma Mahler-Gropius, who had died of polio. Berg was hospitalized and died on December 24, 1935, and the *Violin Concerto*, performed posthumously, proved to be a memorial for the composer as well.

Struggling with their serious personal health problems, confronted with an apathetic and very often aggressively antagonistic society, surmounting ex-

treme financial difficulty, and even—in the case of Arnold Schoenberg—escaping a racial holocaust and adopting a new country and language, our two asthmatic geniuses achieved a very prominent place in the constellation of composers. They opened up a new world of musical esthetics and experiences by transcending conventional compositional methods and developing the 12-tone, serial [8] technique, on which are based some of the greatest musical masterpieces of the 20th century. Although the biographers of Schoenberg and Berg do not provide as much information about the asthma of these men and its treatments as we have in the case of the literary genius Marcel Proust, it can be definitely concluded that there was no positive correlation between this respiratory illness and the composers' work. Their compositions were created despite and not (as the question has arisen in the case of Proust) because of asthma.

REFERENCES

- [1] R. Panzani, *J. Asthma*, 25, 163 (1988).
- [2] C. J. Falliers, *Ibid.*, 23, 97 (1986).
- [3] C. J. Falliers, *Ibid.*, 23, 157 (1986).
- [4] C. J. Falliers, *Ibid.*, 23, 211 (1986).
- [5] B. Straus, *The Maladies of Marcel Proust: Doctors and Disease in His Life and Work*, Holmes & Meier, New York, 1980.
- [6] M. Proust, *Pleasures and Regrets [Les Plaisirs et les Jours]*, L. Varèse, translator, 2nd printing, Ecco Press, New York, 1984.
- [7] O. Neighbor, P. Griffiths, and G. Perle, *Second Viennese School: Schoenberg, Webern, Berg*, The New Grove Composer Biography Series, Norton, New York, 1983.
- [8] D. Arnold (general ed.), *The New Oxford Companion to Music*, Volumes I and II, Oxford University Press, New York, 1984.
- [9] C. J. Falliers, *J. Asthma*, 23, 177 (1986).
- [10] C. J. Falliers, *Ibid.*, 23, 239 (1986).