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Mad Genius Creates Music

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Could madness drive a person to their success? History will always hold a special place for “mad genius”, those who rattles off unorthodox ideas, intelligible to the general population and social norms, yet is an invaluable asset to the population's evolution of culture and knowledge over time. In terms of the evolution of music over the century, artist with unusual music style has captured the attention of people and continued their legacy over the century even after their death. Three outstanding artists, who made a breakthrough in their careers who are Don Carlo Gesualdo, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Robert Schumann, surprisingly can be labeled as “mad genius”. Is there a coincidence between the creativity and the mental illness of one, or are the two factors correlate with each other in order to achieve the impossible?

The name Don Carlo Gesualdo is remembered in the history books as the man who slaughtered his wife and her lover, the Duke of Andria, and his wicked chromaticism skills. Don Carlo Gesualdo was an Italian Prince in the Renaissance. Unlike most aristocrats of his day, he was a virtuoso musician and composed beautiful and expressive music, but there was also a darker side to his character. Born in 1556 to one of the noblest families in the Kingdom of Naples (Schwartz, 1995). Raised as the heir to the family estates after the death of his elder brother, Gesualdo main priority is marriage to continue the family heirloom. In 1586, Gesualdo married his first cousin, Donna Maria d'Avalos.

However, two years later she began a love affair with Fabrizio Carafa, the Duke of Andria, and this affair has been kept away from her husband for two years. Finally, on October 1590, Gesualdo caught his wife and her lover in bed together and he ‘massacred’ them on that fateful night. He even killed his (or Don Fabrizio’s) son by swinging him to death in his castle courtyard while singing a madrigal about death (Knowles, 2013). His marriage doesn’t end there,

Gesualdo married again in Ferrara to Leonora d'Este, niece of Ferrara's duke. The arranged marriage is intended to build a strong economy relationship between the two families (Schwartz, 1995). Unfortunately, Gesualdo second marriage proved unhappy as his new wife accused him of abuse, the husband and wife essentially separated. Shortly after his wife left, his eldest son died. His final years were spent in a masochistic and depressive frenzy with his servant (Knowles, 2013). Most like his death involved beaten to death by his servant in a masochistic rampage in 1613 (Schwartz, 1995)

Indeed, his biography kept his name alive for a number of centuries but his music style capture the attention of the audience deeper into Gesualdo's legacy. Fueled by pain, jealousy and death, the madrigal composer used his ability to infuse his emotions and his tragic into his musical style. This instinctive composer, Carlo Gesualdo, made his last two books of madrigal, his fifth and sixth both publish in 1611, noted for their use of extreme chromaticism involving love-death metaphor. This collection was published two years before his death in 1613, a point where he was suffering the masochistic episode and guilt over his child's death. Among the madrigals in his last collections, *Moro*, *lasso*, *al mio duolo*, expressed a strong erotic suffering as it central theme and image (Schwartz, 1995). In the score, the chromaticism alternates with a quick-tempo in diatonic passages, giving out an eerie feeling, as it feels uncomfortable and awkward for the listeners. Gesualdo was peculiarly keen on chromatic third relations from C-sharp major and A minor chord, or even A major and F major as seen in the beginning on the *Moro* *lasso* score. Of course, Gesualdo representation in his madrigal theme of love and death with chromaticism is not by chance, perhaps Gesualdo's talent at reminiscent musical style derives from his tragic, literal, pain, intellectual, or it could be all of them (Venosa, 2014). His source of his eerie sound music could be traced back upon the discovering his wife and her lover

in a compromising situation, leading to murdered them both in a fit of rage. Therefore, Gesualdo's violence is fueled by love, lost, and jealousy alone, which explains the sense of violent aura on the brink of insanity in his music.

Throughout Moro, lasso, there is a constant tension in the chromatic rage in the madrigal, the cried for help then suddenly changed into another tone with loud pressure in an uneasy harmony. The piece begins with long-held notes in a descending half steps in slow movement, this could represents death and agony the artist is feeling when composing this piece (Knowles, 2013). The long-held notes will create suspense and it will die out in unison, which could relate to his dull life after he murdered his own wife. Descending half step in slow movement indicates Gesualdo's agony for death to claim him, descending slowly to Hell (Venosa, 2014). Clearly, this kind of abutment recurs throughout the piece that expresses the text of his misery where the gasping pauses and glamping held notes of surprise, his life is portrayed by active continuous motion and counterpoint, death and pain by devastating chromatic chords movement; which all emerges as Gesualdo's inner battle with his guilt and lost.

Madness indeed drives a man to kill his own family and happens to develop a musical talent that is out of his century. People like Gesualdo are not the only mad geniuses around the century; Beethoven has made a mark and impression in the history of Romanticism and the future generations. Widely hailed as one of the greatest composers of all time, Ludwig van Beethoven was a musical genius constantly troubled by physical ailment that haunts his life that began in early adulthood and lasted until his death. Baptized in the Catholic parish church of St. Remigius in Boon, Ludwig van Beethoven legend began on December 17th, 1770 (Macmillan, 2012). Beethoven earliest music instructions were piano lessons from his father, Johann, when he was four or five years old. The piano lessons were training for Beethoven in pursue for him to be

the second Wunderkind like Mozart, the exercise was harsh for young Beethoven as sometimes there are crying in the process. Johann van Beethoven also arranged lessons from old Court organist, tenor singer and relatives to build Beethoven's music talents in Johann's state of drunk and boisterous. Also, Johann also advertised his son, Beethoven, concert in Cologne on March 26, 1778 (Mailto, 2014). To sum up the course of Beethoven's musical training during his childhood, Johann later realized that there is no way he could make money out off his boy by passing him around as a child prodigy like Mozart and the novelty of piano Wunderkinder had worn off. Therefore, he shifts his focus to training his son to become a musical breadwinner to support the family income as soon as possible.

After his father Wunderkind influence ended, Christian Gottlob Neefe took over Beethoven's training on piano and organ (Pryce-Jones 11-27). Beethoven was free from his father's control and he went to Vienna where he settled. Neefe recognized the boy's genius and took him under his apprenticeship, trusting him to take over his duties as court organist (Mailto, 2014). Gradually, Beethoven gains self-confidence as a musician and he took every opportunity to increase the income of his family. Beethoven, at thirteen, began to teach the von Breuning family's children piano where they paid him handsomely and let him spent many nights as guest, improvising on the piano to the delight of the family's company (Pryce-Jones 25). The tutor session is a tremendous financial help to his family. In between, Beethoven successfully publishes some music and preformed in theaters (Macmillan 2012).

However, when he finally return home, Beethoven arrived at the moment to witness his mother's final suffering from tuberculosis. She died in July 1787. Then, a letter was sent to Dr. Joseph Wilhelm von Schaden, in Augsburg on October 1787, from Beethoven. In the letter he describes his emotional state during the ordeal of his return journey and grief that manifest later.

In his letter, he mentioned joy, suffering, pain, and images that my imagination calls up, this could indicate his early depression symptom (Anderson 3-4). Eventually in 1802, Beethoven wrote a will-like document, addressed to his two brother where he describe his bitter unhappiness suggesting he thought death was near when he realized he had hearing impaired. That letter is the famous *Heiligenstadt Testament*, written by Ludwig van Beethoven to his brothers Carl and Johann (Thackara, 1979). Another letter Beethoven send where he poured out his heart to his closet friend with his growing loss of hearing, Franz Gerhard Wegeler (Mailto, 2014). In the letter, he describe his symptoms worsening and it could not be healed, that he is leading a sad life avoiding all company, and he asked his friend to keep this news as a secret (Anderson 57-62). His second letter to Wegeler on November 16th 1801 responding to his friend about the doctors prescription and treatment for him, the ringing sound in his ear, improved social life, and expresses that his youth is just beginning and he feels his strength returning (Anderson 66-68).

Beethoven came through with his determination strengthened and entered a new creative phase; the revelation of silence changed his music style and his view of life. Later in 1804, Beethoven completed Symphony No. 3 in E flat minor (“Eroica”), which was premiered in Theater-an-der-Wien (Pryce-Jones 62). The whole symphony was revolutionary; the movement has a long-range harmonic connection that explores the course of the Romantic era musical styles. A “Funeral March” slow movement was also extraordinary, Beethoven added scherzo to surprise the audience plus unprecedented scales. In terms of psychologically, the funeral march indicates Beethoven’s need for a break and his misery from his hearing loss. Finally he sets up for a racy finale where he includes a fugue that race to the end of the symphony (Macmillan 2012). Beethoven’s genius mind that composes Eroica explores the range of invention in the

symphony and gripping the listener attention with shocking drama of funeral march. Beethoven called this point of his life to be the middle period that is his turning point of his life to a brighter side.

With his powerful and expansive middle-period works that include the Pastoral Symphony, Concerto No. 5 (“Emperor”), several other piano concertos and violin concertos, and piano sonatas, Beethoven was highly established as the greatest composer of his time. In 1808, he ended his piano-playing career as his complete deafness that was a disaster (Macmillan 2012). His life turned upside down again starting from 1812, when he had been seriously depressed resulting his complete isolation, and anxieties over the custodianship of the son of his late brother. More piano sonatas were written at that period like “Hammerklavier” op. 106 with its dynamic writing and harsh frustrating fugue. There is anger and pain in his sonatas that was influenced from that stage of his ordeal (Pryce-Jones 96-110). On the other hand, Beethoven’s finest symphony, *Ninth Symphony*, is the main narrator of his history. Even though Beethoven had little confidence in his audience and it is also his lowest point of his life, he hesitantly chose to perform his symphony in the *Kaerthnerthor-Theater* on May 7th 1824. The performance was magnificent as reports stated that the performance was perfect, audience clapping hands and waving hats. Beethoven received countless of praises and support from people around him, even his nephew Carl went to watch the box office performance. The symphony was sent to the Philharmonic Society in London and received the sum of fifty British Pounds (Mailto, 2014).

Beethoven’s reputation went far beyond Vienna and his symphonies became his new identity, a hero and public figure to the later generations, his music and him will live to the end of time. When, early in 1827, he died, 10,000 attended the funeral at the Währing Cemetery on March 29th (Mailto, 2014).

The great man who experience what no man should for his career manages to overcome it and return stronger, exceeding everyone's expectation. The period where he experiences his loss of hearing and depression is the turning point of his life, but it also points out his physical ailments. It has been suggested by Philip Dehm, that Beethoven also suffered from bipolar disorder or manic-depression; a psychological disorder where an individuals associates with episodes of depression and unusual shift in a person's mood (Dehm 2008). Many aspects of Beethoven's life strongly suggest the presence of the bipolar and manic depression. For example, Beethoven has been constantly moving around in rented accommodation between 1792 till his death in 1827, with a total of 24 different addresses (Anderson). His constant moving is due to his moods where he will have dissatisfaction with the lodging or conflicts with the landlords. His lifestyle fits the description of his psychological illness where it affects his life on his ability to damage relationships and incite dreadful behavior.

Also, there are also episodes of depression in Beethoven's life when he sends letters to his friend Wegeler. For example, in a letter to Wegeler in 15th December 1800, Beethoven announced that the winter he is miserable and it lasted for four weeks (Anderson 42). This suggest that Beethoven is experienced an episode where he is compares his life before his hearing impair and his current life, and the four week is the perfectly normal length of time for a depressive episode (Dehm 2008). Also, in 1801, Beethoven wrote another letter to Wegeler describing his "brief period of cheerfulness", only to find himself, a few months later, "in the depths of depression" (Anderson 57-62, 66-68). Letters to Wegeler are evidence of Beethoven experience of manic depression that occur in episodes. However, the mental illness possibly having as much of an impact on his art as his deafness did. In fact, depression can make a person a perfectionist, while mania invokes more ambition, unflagging and confidence in oneself (Dehm

2008). The mood shift from the bipolar creates a solid ground for originality to harvest, which is the core for creativity giving Beethoven the upper hand.

Unlike Ludwig van Beethoven's situation where his psychological illness was not known or treated, Robert Schumann was legally insane. A composer in the Romantic period, but what made him out shine other composer was his startling manic-depression. Schumann was born on June 8, 1810, in Saxony, Germany. His father was a bookseller, therefore young Schumann was surrounded by books from a early age inspiring his later life to be a novelist. His dream was cut-short as his attention turns to music despite his new goal to be a concert pianist; his family pressures him to attend law school (Libbey, 2007). Following his family wish to attend law school, Schumann dedicate much of his time to improve his piano skills, learning theory from Heinrich Dorn, and taking piano lesson from Friedrich Wieck.

Slowly, his mania episodes started to emerge as his dream to be a concert pianist was impossible, as Schumann permanently injured his right hand. He used a mechanical device designed to strengthen the weakest fingers, a weird device which held back one finger while he exercised the others causing the hand to stretch beyond the human biological limits (Guu & Su, 2010). Due to this mania episode, Schumann abandoned idea of a concert career and finally devotes himself to a life of composition. While studying under Wieck, Schumann fell in love with Wieck's daughter, Clara. However, she was ten years younger than him, but after five years, they fell in love. Not to be surprise, Wieck disapprove their love and marriage because he believes that she does not deserve him as Schumman is a penniless composer. Despite her father's disapproval over her love, they got married in 1840 and eventually had eight children (Libbey, 2007).

Robert Schumann began publishing his composition in 1834. He founded and began editing *The New Journal for Music*. In his following years, Schumann successfully published *Pappillons* and *Carnaval* (Libbey, 2007). However, there is a pattern for his publishing and composing period. The composer completed four works in 1839, when he was depressed, but he managed to compose 25 the following year, a period of mania. While the quantity of Schumann's composition swelled during his manic years, the average quality of his works didn't change and it continues to improve. *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16, 1838, is considered as one of Schumann's greatest works. His work consists of his fantasies and emotional deep range (Guu & Su, 2010). Schumann used this piece to express his emotional state, that year is one of his mania periods. In total of his career, Schumann composed 168 compositions that made him one of the most unique composers in his era (Libbey, 2007).

Despite his illness, Schumann always has a confident personality, perhaps due to his mania and bipolar personality. Unfortunately, his mania episodes ruined one of his concert rehearsals when his conducting was discombobulated until the board of management fired him. Schumann's condition worsens when he felt unworthy of Clara's love and he was afraid that he would hurt her. In February 27th 1854, Schumann attempted suicide after jumping off a bridge into the cold river. He had drawn enough public attention, that fortunately he was rescued from drowning as soon as he jumped. Surprisingly, suicidal traits could be traced back to Schumann's family history. Schumann had experienced early life traumatic events of his sister's suicide where she jumps into the river too, and the sudden death of his father when his mother was away in a sanatorium for mental illness. Indeed, there is a psychiatric disorder in his family tree that could explain his mania behavior. Finally, he admitted himself into an asylum for the remaining two

years of his life. Sadly, he died from pneumonia after his succumb to from jumping (Guu & Su, 2010).

The three composers support the existence of a relationship between creativity and bipolar disorders. Gesualdo, Beethoven and Schumann are mad geniuses who change the meaning of music in their era and leaving a mark in the musical style for future composers. People with bipolar mood disorders are more certain to be more emotionally reactive, which exhibits more sensitivity and acuteness in their daily lifestyle. Especially composers that deal with music as part of their life are free to express their emotions and creativity, and challenge their limits to make greater compositions for their listeners. They are more open to experimentation and risk-taking behavior, and thus creating great compositions that exist till now.

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