

'Bimbimbie'
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9 May 1997

Dear Doug,

How did Schubert die?

This what I wrote (I hope it's what I said!):

'It is also somewhat less cheerful and ebullient than much of Schubert's music, which has caused commentators to suggest that Schubert was aware of his coming death. I never know what to make of comments like these, and wonder whether Schubert was indeed aware of his coming death, and how he could have been sure, since he died of typhoid fever after having drunk tainted water. He was certainly worried about money, as he was for most of his adult life. Whatever his state of mind in 1827, the result is beautiful music.'

Where did I get the explanation from? *Chamber's Biographical Dictionary* says that he died of 'typhus'. The *EB* says that he died of typhoid fever after drinking tainted water. The *New Oxford Companion* says that 'His final illness was diagnosed as 'typhus abdominalis' which seems to have been equivalent to typhoid fever. But it may well have been hastened, even caused, by the disease which he knew to be incurable.' Now typhus and typhoid fever are both infectious diseases, the first caused by *rickettsia* bacteria brought by ticks, lice etc, the second caused by *salmonella* bacteria in tainted food or water. Despite the *NOC* it is not plain how either could be hastened, let alone caused, by syphilis. But if you allow the connection then you can go on to write (*NOC* again): 'the clairvoyant quality of these last works, their vision and authority, reflects the fate of a man who knew himself to be doomed.' Hence, I suppose, my scepticism.

The syphilis diagnosis may have been proved. I don't know — my available sources don't say. But (a) most syphilis patients don't advance to the tertiary stage, (b) the secondary stage can last a lifetime, (c) in about half of those who do reach the tertiary stage the outcome is relatively benign, (d) it would be rare for someone as young as Schubert to have reached the tertiary stage anyway if he did in fact have syphilis, and (e) Bev thinks it's pretty unlikely! To be kinder to the supposed connection, syphilis in its tertiary stage can attack almost any part of the body, so if he did have syphilis, and he was in the tertiary stage, and the disease attacked his gastro-intestinal system, then he might have been sufficiently weakened to have succumbed to a salmonella or rickettsia bug that a healthier man might have resisted. And if he knew / thought he had syphilis, and that it would finally kill him, then his resistance might have been lower for that reason. But I am still sceptical! I don't actually find these 'doomed' qualities in Schubert's last works, so I'm not moved to develop such explanations.

With best wishes,