

# Army helps DNA scientist unravel Mozart mystery

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*Army News Service*

WASHINGTON – U.S. military DNA researchers have been involved in a 200-year-old mystery about the identity of a skull long-suspected to be that of classical music composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

"Past tests were inconclusive, but this time, we succeeded in getting a clear result," said lead researcher Dr. Walther Parson, a renowned forensic pathologist at the Institute of Legal Medicine, Innsbruck Medical University, Austria. He said the results were "100 percent verified" by a U.S. Army laboratory.

Department of Defense scientists at the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory, a division of the Office of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner, Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Rockville, Md., were presented with a small tooth from the skull to be analyzed and compared with DNA samples taken from three skeletons exhumed from the Mozart family grave, at San Sebastian Cemetery, Salzburg, Austria.

"When the Austrians determined they needed a lab to corroborate this very important historic case, they contacted me in early 2005 and requested that we do so," said Dr. Thomas J. Parsons, Mozart skull project leader at AFIP. "There were three scientists involved in the testing; myself, Dr. Odile Loreille and Army Col. Brion Smith."

The world-renowned classical musical composer Mozart was an unsalaried deputy kapellmeister (orchestra and choir master) of St. Stephen's in Vienna

when he died on Dec. 5, 1791, in his Vienna apartment after succumbing to what most historians and scholars have long-believed to be a fever at the age of 35. He was laid to rest in a pauper's grave at Vienna's St. Mark's Cemetery on Dec. 6, 1791.

In 1801, the St. Mark's Cemetery Trust had the third-class plot in which Mozart – and 15 to 20 others were buried – retrenched, which was an automatic procedure every 10 years to enable graves to be reused. The cemetery, which opened in 1784, only had room for 7,000 graves and plots were expensive. Wealthy residents' bones were cleaned and placed in a charnel house with their names painted on the skull whereas the bones of the poor were exhumed and crushed, reinterred in the Vienna Zentralfriedhof (central cemetery) or disposed of in some other way.

Mozart's grave was reopened by Joseph Rothmayer, the same grave digger who had buried him a decade earlier. Rothmayer knew before the burial in 1791 what Mozart's ultimate fate would be, so he had tied wire around Mozart's neck to enable him to distinguish the remains from the others. When 10 years had passed, Rothmayer knew the exact location of the body, sought it out and saved the skull from the bone crusher. The skull of Mozart would meet the same fate of his music peers – Beethoven, Liszt, Schubert and Haydn; their skulls were also exhumed by students of phrenology and displayed by collectors.

The first century of the skull's above-ground journey would end with a private donation in 1902 to the

International Mozarteum Foundation in Salzburg, Austria. It remained on public display there until 1955, and has since been subjected to several forensic tests by researchers, doctors and historians from around the world. Until now, the findings have not been compelling enough for the Mozarteum to accept them – one way or the other – as the definitive truth as to the true identity of the skull.

Initial DNA tests on the skull were conducted during 2005 by experts at the Institute for Forensic Medicine, Innsbruck, Austria.

Herbert Ullrich, a forensic pathologist who has studied the skeletons of famous Germans and Austrians, said he was convinced the Mozart skull was of someone other than Mozart.

"Our results definitively refute that the skull is female," said Parsons. "The skull is of a male. It was the powder located in the center of the tooth that the genetic material was gathered from."

"As forensic scientists, the only optimism you're going to have is that you'll find out the actual answer, no matter what that answer is," Parsons said. "The biggest concern we had was that the DNA typing was done correctly."

Gerhard Reiter, the archaeologist in charge of the exhumation of the Mozart family vault at the Salzburg Sebastian Cemetery in 2004, said he hoped to solve the dispute by retrieving DNA from Mozart's relatives and matching it with reproducible DNA data from the skull. Genetic material samplings from one of the skull's teeth was analyzed and compared to DNA samples gathered from the thigh bones believed to be that of Mozart's maternal grandmother and

niece, Jeanette. The relevant DNA was passed down the female line – in this case, via Mozart's sister Nannerl.

"When we engage in these collaborative exercises on particularly difficult materials, it further validates the work we do every day for the missing Soldiers from the Korean and Vietnam era and beyond," said Parsons. "With that in mind, we got wonderful results from all the DNA samples that we typed, from the reference samples from the family grave to the putative tooth from the skull. Both our lab and the Austrian lab achieved exactly the same results and in some cases, we recovered a remarkable amount of information – especially from the tooth."

"All the samples from the three who were believed to be relatives of Mozart all had different mitochondrial DNA from each other, and from the Mozart skull. So if any one of them is an actual maternal relative of Mozart, it means that the skull is not Mozart's. We don't know if that is the case so the final analysis is inconclusive, said Parsons.

"We have attained definitive results from the skull," said Parsons. "In the future, if anyone comes forward with an authentic matrilineal relative or a paternal relative, we now have 'Y' chromosomal data and we will be in a position to make a confirmation. It's considered to be known where Mozart's sister Nannerl is buried, but I don't know if there are any plans in Austria to act on that information and work another archeological exhumation."

After months of testing, the identity of the skull remains inconclusive to be that of world-renowned 18th-century classical musical composer Mozart.

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