

The Last Years of Joseph Haydn in the Light of Depression-dementia Medius

Author:

Toshiyuki Kobayashi,
M.D., Ph.D.

Affiliation:

Department of Psychiatry,
Jichi Medical University

Correspondence:

3311-1 Yakushiji,
Shimotsuke-shi, Tochigi
329-0498, Japan.

E-mail:

kabakun@jichi.ac.jp

Tel: +81-285-58-7364

FAX: +81-285-44-6198

Abstract

In this paper, I introduce the concept of depression-dementia medius, presenting the last days of Franz Joseph Haydn as an example. Haydn was a famous classical composer who spent most of his life as a court musician for the Esterházy family and composed some 700 works. This demanding work in the court was achieved under conditions of high psychological tension (P. Janet), and after Haydn completed the first two movements of his last string quartet, op.103, in 1803, he could no longer compose. At that time his psychological health declined, possibly due to exhaustion after lengthy creative work. Haydn retired to his house in Vienna, cared for by his familiar servants and sometimes evidenced depressive moods or cognitive impairment. It is likely that he developed subcortical vascular encephalopathy, but he did not critically develop depression nor dementia. His innate higher psychological tension and familiar circumstances kept him in a state of depression-dementia medius.

<Key words: depression, dementia, psychological tension>

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1. INTRODUCTION

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) was a famous 18th-century classical composer who spent most of his life as a court musician to the Esterházy family in Hungary. Nowadays, he may be overshadowed by Mozart, whose life was colored by his journeys to various regions in Europe, and by Beethoven, who lived a turbulent life in the era of the French Revolution. Yet, Haydn was a much-loved and acclaimed composer during his lifetime. He wrote over a hundred symphonies, some seventy string quartets, over sixty keyboard sonatas, and a number of operas, masses, and other works.

After Haydn completed the first two movements of his last string quartet, op.103, in 1803, he could no longer compose. In 1805, he abandoned all thought of completing the quartet and he affixed a card with the words “All my power has gone, I am old and weakened” to the score.

In this paper, I introduce the concept of depression-dementia medius,¹ presenting the last days of Haydn² as an example.

2. THE LIFE OF HAYDN

Joseph Haydn, the son of a craftsman in Rohrau, Austria, received musical training from his uncle Johann Matthias Frankh, a schoolmaster and choirmaster in Hainburg, 12 kilometers away from his

birthplace. In 1739, Haydn was discovered by Georg von Reutter, the director of music at St. Stephen's cathedral in Vienna, and he worked there for the next nine years as a chorister. When his voice broke, he was deprived of his job and became a freelance musician until he was employed by Count Morzin as a Kapellmeister (director of music) of the Count's orchestra in 1757. In 1760, Haydn married Maria Anna Theresia Keller, but it was an unhappy marriage. Haydn's wife was a spendthrift and lacked understanding of her husband's music. They had no children.

Haydn's career progressed and in 1762 he was offered the position of Vice-Kapellmeister by Prince Paul Anton Esterházy, a great landowner in the Kingdom of Hungary, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The 29-year-old Haydn would serve the Esterházy's for some thirty years. The next year, Prince Paul Anton died and Prince Nikolaus I, a brilliant, enlightened despot and a music lover, succeeded him. The aged Kapellmeister, Gregor Werner, was engaged in only church music, and leaving Haydn involved in all the other jobs that the Kapellmeister was required to perform. When Werner died in 1766, Haydn was elevated to full Kapellmeister and he composed a flood of works.

In 1790, Prince Nikolaus died and was succeeded as prince by his son Anton, who lacked interest in music. Haydn became only a nominal Kapellmeister and this gave him some freedom, allowing

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him to move to Vienna and compose for a broader range of people. Two of Haydn's journeys to London in his later years are significant. During this period he composed the twelve symphonies known as the London (or Salomon) Symphonies, including the *Clock*, *Surprise*, and *London* symphonies.

During Haydn's second journey to London, Prince Anton died. Haydn's fourth lord, Nikolaus II, wanted to revive the musical glory of Nikolaus I, and his interests in church music led Haydn to compose six great masses and an oratorio, *Die Schöpfung* (*The Creation*).

3. HAYDN'S FINAL DAYS

The oratorio *The Creation*, which was composed in collaboration with the librettist Gottfried van Swieten, a diplomat, librarian, and government official in Vienna, was premiered in 1798 and enthusiastically received. Haydn enjoyed great popularity in Europe, with about 600 compositions published by 125 publishers.

Baron Swieten planned Haydn's next oratorio, *Die Jahreszeiten* (*The Seasons*). He assembled financial sponsors and offered a libretto he had written himself to Haydn. However, Haydn was reluctant to compose to the text, observing: "In *The Creation* the characters are angels. Now they are mere farmers."³ He felt the tone-painting and simulating expressions of the text bothersome. Above all, he was opposed to Swieten's inclusion of the croaking of

frogs, complaining that it was in bad taste.⁴

Notwithstanding this, Haydn completed *The Seasons* in 1801, and it also received great acclaim. Although Haydn would compose two more large-scale works following *The Seasons*—the *Creation Mass* and *Harmoniemesse*—he became aware of a decline in his creativity that had occurred during his composition of the oratorio. He wrote in a letter to the publisher Breitkopf und Härtel in 1799: "because of my impeding old age, and declining mental capacity, I can only fulfill the smallest part of my business [...] some days my weak memory and the deterioration of my nerves bring me down so much [...] that many days afterwards I am lost for ideas."^{5, 6} Finally, as has been mentioned above, he could not compose anymore at all from 1803.

Haydn believed that he had fully exhausted himself due to overwork while setting Swieten's lumbering text to music, and that at last he had lost his health.⁴

From 1805 to 1808, Albert Christoph Dies, a painter and an admirer of Haydn, made a series of thirty visits to the old composer to write his biography. During this period, Haydn kept up his lifestyle and on every visit he greeted Dies *en grande tenue*, except when he declined a meeting because of bad health. Haydn sometimes had trouble in walking, and was easily disturbed and moved to tears. He despaired over the weakness of his memory and sometimes he actually forgot the reason for Dies's visit, although

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he could recall the past well. But he could not compose at all. He told Georg August Griesinger, another of his biographers, "My memory is gone, sometimes I still have some good ideas at the piano, but I could cry, as I am not capable any more of repeating them or writing them down."⁶ He sometimes even had musical hallucinations.⁴

However, Haydn's condition swung back and forth; he could still write a letter in December 1808³ and even played the piano when he felt well. The last handwritten remark in his diary is still legible only a few months before his death.⁶ Dies pointed out that Haydn "seems to take delight in picturing his own state of health worse than it really is."⁴

On May 10, 1809, when the French army under Napoleon approached the borders of Vienna, four cannonballs detonated very close to Haydn's house. Haydn was absolutely horrified by this, but he gathered all his courage together and screamed to reassure his servants: "Children, don't be afraid. Where Haydn is, nothing can happen to you!"⁴ On May 26, he played his beloved *Kaiserlied* three times expressively. He passed away with his loyal servants at his side on May 31, aged 77.

4. NOT DEPRESSED NOR DEMENTED

We have no problem when considering Haydn's physical condition in his later years. Bänzner and Hennerici supposed

that he had subcortical vascular encephalopathy,⁶ which was once called Binswanger's disease. However, his mental state did not fit the description of a dementia or a depression.

According to Dies's account,⁴ the aging Haydn could disguise his bad mood from visitors and he seemed to keep his character even in the very month of his death. His memory became poorer, but he did not show behavioral disturbance. His servants made a point of driving away his gloomy moods, because he was prone to fall into them. However, he was not apparently demented or depressed.

Haydn was taught, and acclaimed, cleanliness and order, and he once said his way of working was to write down what he thought good and then arrange it following the rules of harmonics.⁴ N. Ito, a musicologist, gave a plausible description of Haydn's music: works by Haydn are not like a lavishly produced dinner at a suit-and-tie restaurant, but more like a potluck meal (albeit a fine one) cooked in a limited time.⁷ In his later life, Haydn still found good musical ideas,⁵ but he could not repeat them and write them down.⁵ But this issue is possibly not a matter of memory. When he had a motif, Haydn could not put it into a musical structure, including forms and harmonies, following the rules of cleanliness and order. If things went wrong, he said: "A lot of motifs always give chase to me as if to torture me".⁴ It was not that he caught musical motifs but rather that the motifs caught him. This complaint suggests musical hallucinations,

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though we can illuminate this in another way by applying P. Janet's concept of psychological force (*force psychologique*) and psychological tension (*tension psychologique*).⁸

To evaluate human mental activity, Janet introduced two parameters: psychological force and psychological tension. Psychological force in this view is nearly identical to biological power, which every individual naturally embodies and which provides a platform for abilities involving swift, long-lasting, and multi-faceted action. Psychological tension indicates the ability to use psychological force to drive appropriate behavior in social situations. Greater psychological tension is required to perform more complex and more varied operations. Janet compared psychological force and tension to assets and its management, or to military strength and strategy.

In Haydn's case, although motifs equivalent to military strength or assets come to mind, Haydn could not utilize strategy or management. Thus, musical motifs were beyond his control and did not settle in his compositions, or sometimes became hallucinations. Janet points out that exhaustion after psychological stress is the major cause of declining psychological tension.⁹ Haydn's complaint that composing *The Seasons* affected his health was not the mere grumbling of an old man. It was an astute statement.

If we think back, we see that Haydn's composing process itself

required the highest psychological tension. To revisit Ito's metaphor, Haydn's music is a "potluck meal" rather than a lavish dinner. In contrast to "lavish dinner" music, which can be produced by lavishly spending psychological force, this potluck music can be produced only under the highest psychological tension: with the cool-headed management of limited assets.

As a court musician, Haydn's daily composition was subjected to various restraints, including performance time, musical genres, and the performers available, and he aimed to get the best results. However, Haydn would not have had an absolute ideal image of a composition in his mind before composing it.⁷ He composed music like calligraphy, something unmodifiable after starting out, "hoping to reach an unpredictable frontier, catching a wave of slippage and gaps which calligraphy inevitably produces. He concentrated on coming to such a frontier."⁷ Such work required high psychological tension, which Haydn had to maintain over his entire career. It is no wonder that he finally became completely exhausted.

5. DEPRESSION-DEMENTIA MEDIUS

Depression and dementia are both common conditions in clinical practice. Both sometimes coexist, they can sometimes succeed each other, and they often confuse clinicians. Recently a considerable number of studies have

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shown early-life depression being associated with an increased risk of dementia, and late-life depression being a prodrome of dementia.¹⁰ However, the mechanisms involved are not straightforward.

The suggestion arising from our clinical experiences that depression and dementia are often not clearly distinguishable states, but rather may coexist or interpenetrate each other, led to the concept of depression-dementia medius.¹ When we regard human life as a psychosomatic complex in a state of incessant dynamic equilibrium,¹¹ it seems

sensible to view depressive pseudodementia¹² and depression in dementias as being located on a spectrum, that is, in "depression-dementia medius" (Figure 1).¹ When we consider the manifestation of dementia symptoms, we must look at it from the viewpoint of this dynamic equilibrium. As to depressive pseudodementia, depressive states cause the temporary decline of psychological tension and subsequently reveal latent dementia. In contrast, recovery or psychological tension can mean compensating for latent dementia.

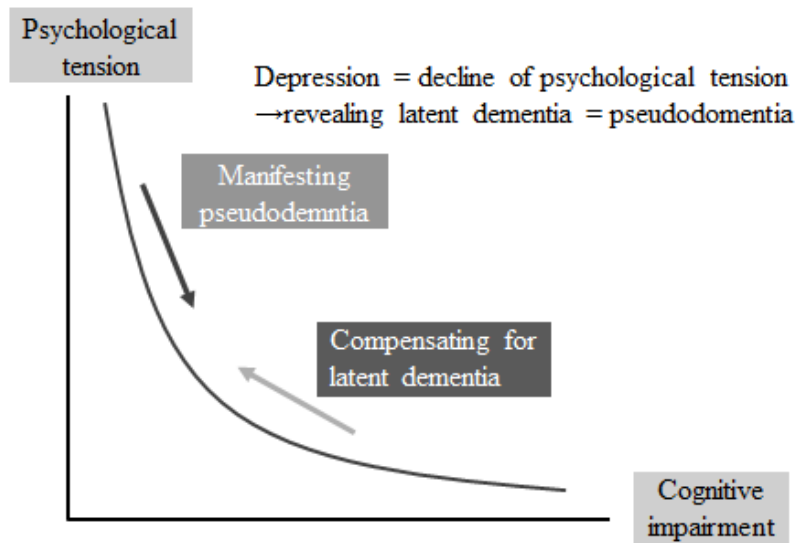


Figure 1: RELATION BETWEEN DEPRESSION AND DEMENTIA

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Aging itself and other circumstantial factors can shift the curve on the spectrum to the right (Figure 2),

meaning that the same tasks require higher psychological tension or reveal latent dementia.

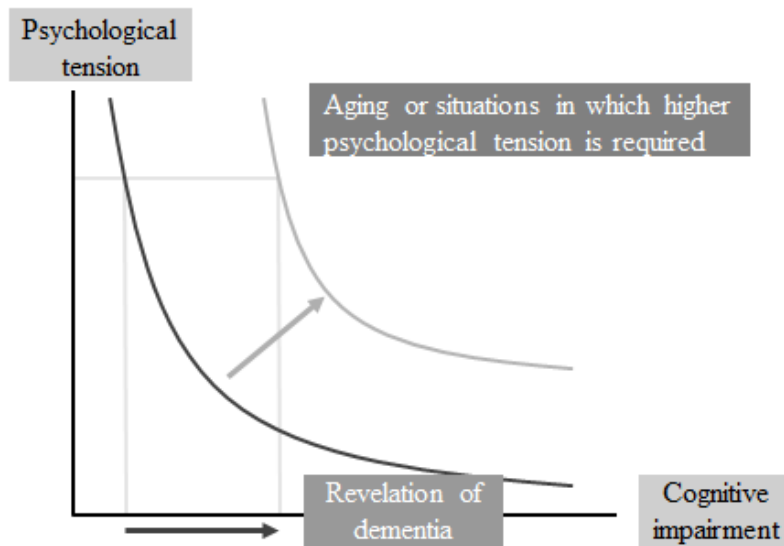


Figure 2: REVELATION of LATENT DEMENTIA

The condition of Haydn's central nervous system in his last years can be supposed to have included cerebrovascular lesions along with the ordinary aging process, but Haydn's higher psychological tension might have compensated for any insidious cognitive impairment until he

finished *The Seasons*. Then, Haydn fell into the field of depression-dementia medius. However, after Haydn's innate higher psychological tension declined, it still maintained a relatively high level (Figure 3).

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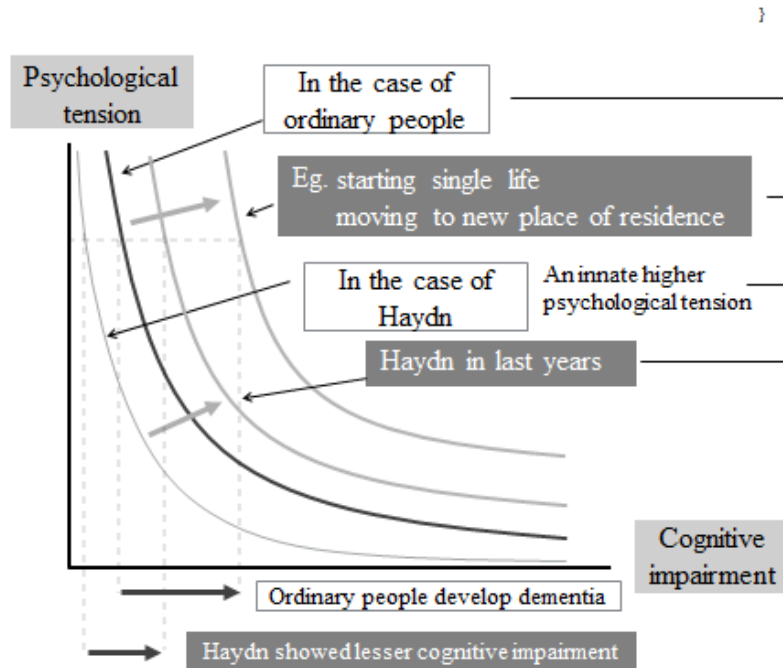


Figure 3: In the Case of Haydn

He showed no cognitive impairment, but he could not compose his potluck music any more. When he temporarily suffered from a depressive mode, latent cognitive impairment may have surfaced under conditions of impaired compensation mechanisms in the brain due to functional incapacity caused by depression. When a patient recovers from depression, cognitive impairment returns to latency.

We must detect one more factor which kept up Haydn's psychological tension: the circumstances surround him. He continued to live in his familiar house with his familiar servants. A familiar environment maintains psychological tension, which is often impaired in

institutionalized elderly people. When the French army was approaching Vienna, Haydn's psychological tension rose temporarily, and he collected all his psychological power to reassure his servants.

6. CONCLUSION

Dementia is usually thought to be an irreversible condition. However, we must note that a fair number of patients presenting depressive symptoms are instead in the depression-dementia medius, which has the potential to resist dementia. The concept of

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depression-dementia medius provides a comprehensive view of such patients, focusing on psycho-social aspects as well as biological or psychopharmacological aspects, and offers the opportunity for better care for elderly people.

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