Chapter 19

Musical prodigies within the virtual stage of YouTube

Freya M. de Mink and Gary E. McPherson

Introduction

Created in February 2005, YouTube has become the most vibrant, popular, and accessible platform for online user-created video sharing. As such, it is transforming the way many internet users around the world find information of interest to them, thereby shaping the way they make sense of the world and come to acquire beliefs that shape their lives. YouTube has videos on almost every topic, with music of all kinds being an integral feature of the medium. Its importance in a book such as this is that YouTube has become the single largest resource for viewing the talents of musicians of all kinds.

Within the resources of YouTube can be found many examples of children who might be classified as “music prodigies” by the general public. For example, any keyword search on “next Mozart” and “music prodigy” will return thousands if not tens of thousands of hits. Headings on these video sites range from descriptions about the performer—“Tiffany Koo (Aged 5) – Chopin Nocturne #20 C Sharp Minor”—to headlines asserting the child’s unique potential and similarity to famous musicians: “The Next Mozart? 6-Year Old Piano Prodigy Wows All”. Among the more prominent examples is a TV documentary on the American composer and pianist Emily Bear (b. 2001) that has received almost 24 million viewings since it was uploaded in 2008. Given that YouTube has become the most internationally recognized resource available to showcase the perceived or actual abilities of young musicians, it is appropriate that the examples shown on YouTube are analysed and discussed in a book on music prodigies.

This chapter examines YouTube as a medium for accessing videos of young music performers. We start by comparing the characteristics of prodigy performances in the past and present. Young performers today face a particular challenge to stand out as exceptional individuals among the vast volume of competing high level performances that are available on the internet. This issue is discussed with attention to the role of the audiences, and notions of popularity and commercial success. Our aim is to expose some of the stereotypes and myths that will be helpful to the overarching aim of this publication which is to explain some of the attributes and issues which frame the phenomenon that we label “musical prodigy.” An important part of our discussion will focus on the stark difference between how the general public typically classifies and defines musical prodigies as opposed to the scientific models presented elsewhere **in f this book.**

Sampling framework

The examples discussed in this chapter were selected based on the suggestions by Burgess and Green (2009), which offer a middle ground between the specificity of case studies and large-scale quantitative analysis. Their survey was designed to examine the shape and scope of YouTube’s

“common culture” and mapped 4,320 videos that had received the highest viewing ratings over a period of 3 months. While offering an efficient way to “order a relatively large body of raw material without selecting it in advance”, the qualitative advantages of this method are that it enables one “to identify patterns across the sample, as well as to interrogate clusters of individual texts using ... much more familiar qualitative methods” (p. 10). Further uses, they suggest, may include “identifying controversies and mapping aesthetic characteristics across particular cultural forms” (p. 10). Our work, based on a much smaller nonrandomized and nonrepresentative sample of 23 videos, singles out one particular area within YouTube’s cultural territory—the subculture or “niche” of musical prodigy videos (see further de Mink, 2013).

The prodigy niche is strongly affected by YouTube’s user interface, which codetermines which videos become popular. An exploratory browsing session based on search terms and the “suggested videos” sidebar reveals that the boundaries of the niche are not always distinct. On the one hand, it is difficult to confine oneself to the domain of music when math, dance, and chess prodigies repeatedly appear among the suggestions. On the other hand, the niche of child expert musicians often seamlessly attaches itself to that of less impressive absolute beginners (of all ages) and adult professionals. Therefore the selection we made aims to illustrate rather than foreclose the connections to these overlapping fields by including the most popular videos of the musical prodigy “niche” in the widest sense. An important consideration was to explore how the figure of Mozart, as evident in concrete events or performances and accessible through traces such as written reports and audiovisual recordings in which the name of Mozart turns up, or which contain less explicit biographic or symbolic resonances to Mozart, operates differently in contemporary prodigious performances (including both “true prodigies” and “potential prodigies”). Although our sample does not aim to be representative, piano remains a highly popular instrument among prodigies and therefore suggests the need for further research detailing instrument-specific performance aspects, such as repertoire, technique, and expressive body movement.

We restricted our survey to videos of musicians *younger than 10* at the time of the recording, given that this age (or the onset of puberty, which occurs a year or two later) is used as the working definition for defining musical prodigies in this book. When multiple videos of a single “prodigy” were found, the video with the *highest number of views* was selected. Furthermore, videos were chosen which show a quality and level of performance that far exceeds the expected level at the given age, recognizing also that this is a less systematic point that leaves room for interpretation. Rather than performance at an adult professional level, the *potential* to reach such a level in the future was deemed to be more appropriate, especially in the case of very young prodigies who were not even 5 years old. The latter point is obviously much harder to apply in musical genres with less familiar and standardized paths of development than “classical piano performance.” Thus, from the outset it is clear that classical piano performance remains a privileged domain.

It is important to also note that the notion of the prodigy and the Mozart figure are historically and culturally bound up with each other (de Mink, 2013). As a consequence, a survey of prodigies will inevitably be biased toward the field of Western art music and toward Mozart-like figures, regardless of the strictness of criteria. In the case of precocious musicality in other genres, the recognition of a prodigy still requires specific resonances with the Mozart figure; think, for example, of how the lonely artist/genius image does not match the context of folk music genres, where musical performance is much more of a collaborative social practice. This limitation in our analysis is therefore cultural and linguistic. Although we have tried to include videos with various languages and geographic origins, some national cultures are more inclined toward celebrating exceptional performance than others.

The list was compiled by partly structured browsing sessions over the course of 3 years, with viewing data being updated when we first started writing this chapter in mid-2013. Many video

titles mention age and instrument, while only some included literal references to the terms “prodigy” or “next Mozart.” The browsing experience reveals that a combination of matching terms and high number of views tightens the connections between a small group of prodigy videos. This can occasionally produce “fake” links, for example to the video of a toddler banging on a piano under the title “Youngest Pianist Ever—14 month old (probably you will not like it).” The statistics of this video reveal that viewing numbers were practically zero up until the first referral from the “related video” of Emily Bear (included in this survey), after which it steadily acquired over 850,000 views. This is because one only discovers the unsatisfactory content after clicking (which increases the number of views by 1; see <http://youtu.be/N4C2SQEJXGs>, accessed 6 January 2014). Obviously, the real number of talented, even prodigious, young musicians performing on YouTube exceeds our survey on many levels. TV talent shows constitute an important genre in which many exceptionally talented young musicians can be found. Another area to be further investigated is that of the institutionalized version of talent shows and music competitions. While some videos from these settings have been included, the online archive could not be explored exhaustively because the musical performances are so numerous and distinct that they merit further study elsewhere.

The YouTube videos

Tables 19.1, 19.2, and 19.3, provide the assembled data on 23 potential prodigy videos (video and source descriptions, prodigy and performance details, and audience response). For added convenience, access to all videos cited in this chapter is available as a playlist (<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLD3rJspnrgriGmQGCgU9frsZUfX00DK2v>, accessed 6 January 2014).

Table 19.1 Video and source description

	Name	Video title	Date added	Duration	URL (accessed 23 April 2013)
1	Akabubu2002*	幻想即興曲 ショパン 8才 Chopin Fantasie Impromptu: 8 years old girl	March 21, 2011	5:21	http://youtu.be/iRrlhKVq2Fk
2	Bear, Emily	The Next Mozart? 6-Year Old Piano Prodigy Wows All	May 15, 2008	4:20	http://youtu.be/vUx4t4W4eVY
3	Bortnick, Ethan	Piano Prodigy	May 18, 2007	4:31	http://youtu.be/MnTKaFPxyo0
4	Camara, Akim	Andre Rieu & 3 year old violinist, Akim Camara 2005	October 17, 2008	9:59	http://youtu.be/JN2SQ4m7M04
5	Deutscher, Alma	Alma Deutscher (aged 6) playing Seitz, violin concerto no. 3 (Keshet Eilon, 2011).	December 31, 2011	5:31	http://youtu.be/Y2rGpAK6nRQ
6	Ehrenfried, Mark	Mark Ehrenfried - German Young-Pianist. “Rhapsody In Rock”	August 28, 2010	1:29	http://youtu.be/NFvawxRsFz4
7	Eunju, Kang	Little North Korean Girl Playing Guitar 北朝鮮少女のギター演奏	February 28, 2009	3:20	http://youtu.be/njG_dQC-cnK
8	Garrett, Umi	Umi Garrett, 8 yr. old - Liszt Gnomereigen	February 22, 2009	3:21	http://youtu.be/sYQB_EldC70

(continued)

Table 19.1 Continued

	Name	Video title	Date added	Duration	URL (accessed 23 April 2013)
9	George, Gavin	Awe-Inspiring 9-Yr-Old Piano Prodigy	August 1, 2012	7:00	http://youtu.be/aaakFH8JIYU
10	Hoffmann, Richard	3-year Old Piano Prodigy Richard Hoffmann	October 24, 2008	2:43	http://youtu.be/9Ygzf709Cml
11	Kahane, Brianna	Incredible 7-Year Old Child Violinist Brianna Kahane Performs "Csardas" on a 1/4-Size violin	January 18, 2010	5:47	http://youtu.be/GEOZ31HeZT4
12	Koffi, Yannick	10 year old Yannick Koffi plays Soul Intro- The Chicken by Jaco Pastorius	October 9, 2009	3:26	http://youtu.be/_kFTOLLRRBo
13	Koo, Tiffany	Tiffany Koo (Age 5) - Chopin Nocturne #20 C Sharp Minor	December 18, 2007	4:01	http://youtu.be/Oc15dAe_o-4
14	Lee, Shuan Hern	Shuan Hern Lee "Flight of the Bumblebee" Child Piano Prodigy on Australia's Got Talent 2010	April 28, 2010	5:26	http://youtu.be/RnVNZ413yfE
15	Levanon, Yoav	Yoav Levanon (7) at Carnegie - Impromptu in A flat major, Op.29, Chopin	April 25, 2011	5:04	http://youtu.be/Fus_YMB2k4k
16	Mukumiy, Nuron	Mozart Piano Concerto No.20 K.466 - 1st Mov (1/2) Nuron Mukumiy - 8 year-old (part 1 of 1)	September 4, 2008	6:03	http://youtu.be/gIEE5Kk9Dqs
17	Okseniuk, Jonathan	3 year old Jonathan conducting to the 4th movement of Beethoven's 5th Symphony	March 15, 2010	4:29	http://youtu.be/OREJ-ICGiKU
18	Paddler16*	Pianist (5 year old Japanese girl): Bach Gigue	February 4, 2007	2:33	http://youtu.be/bl_xx82oTO8
19	Paul, Malaki	Malaki Paul Uncut [HD] - Britains got talent 2012 (auditions)	April 28, 2012	7:14	http://youtu.be/txPQC8NB_-M
20	Rockaz0*	Little Boy Drumming	July 7, 2010	1:34	http://youtu.be/nByWAVEYhhl
21	Thehypnogyuy1*	North Korea children playing the guitar: Creepy as hell.	May 3, 2011	3:29	http://youtu.be/gSedE5sU3uc
22	Trifonov, Daniil [Даниил Трифонов]	8-летний Даниил Трифонов на конкурсе А.Д.Артоболевской [8-year-old Daniil Trifonov at A.D. Artobolevskay Competition]	July 8, 2011	6:25	http://youtu.be/imGD8UsZxu8
23	Tsung, Tsung [聰聰/Andy Lee]	Tsung Tsung Amazing Piano Prodigy Grade5 Piano (5Age) - Flood Time - Air 師承邱世傑	February 11, 2012	3:54	http://youtu.be/e3oNVmSaMsE

*User names are given when full names do not explicitly appear in video title, description, or video content.

For convenient access to these sources, a playlist has been created. Search for "Survey of Musical Prodigies" on YouTube or follow the link: <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLD3rJspnrgiGmQGCGU9frsZUfX00DK2v> (accessed 6 January 2014)

Table 19.2 Prodigies and performance details

Personal details				Performance details		
Name	Age	Girl or boy	Country of residence	Setting	Expertise	Repertoire
1 Akabubu2002	8	Girl	Japan	Concert hall	Piano	Chopin–Fantasie Impromptu
2 Bear, Emily	6	Girl	USA	TV documentary	Piano	Own compositions; Mozart–Concerto no.23; a jazzy tune
3 Bortnick, Ethan	6	Boy	USA	TV documentary	Piano	Various popular and classical pieces
4 Camara, Akim	3	Boy	Germany	Concert hall	Violin	Küchler–Violin concerto
5 Deutscher, Alma	6	Girl	UK	Concert hall	Violin	Seitz–Concerto
6 Ehrenfried, Mark	8?	Boy	Germany	TV Concert	Piano	Wells–Rhapsody in Rock
7 Eunju, Kang	7?	Girl	North Korea	TV Concert	Guitar	Boy Commander (movie tune)
8 Garrett, Umi	8	Girl	USA	Concert hall	Piano	Liszt–Gnomenreigen
9 George, Gavin	9	Boy	USA	TV documentary	Piano	Chopin–Fantasie Impromptu; Liszt–Liebestraum
10 Hoffman, Richard	3	Boy	USA	TV documentary	Piano	Burgmüller–Ballade
11 Kahane, Brianna	7	Girl	USA	Concert hall	Violin	Monti–Czardas
12 Koffi, Yannick	10	Boy	Australia	Private home	Bass guitar	Pastorius–The Chicken Tune
13 Koo, Tiffany	5	Girl	Malaysia	Private home	Piano	Chopin–Nocturne no. 20
14 Lee, Shuan Hern	7	Boy	Australia	TV talent show	Piano	Rachmaninov/Rimsky-Korsakov–Flight of the Bumblebee
15 Levanon, Yoav	7	Boy	USA	Concert hall	Piano	Chopin–Impromptu op. 29
16 Mukumiy, Nuron	8	Boy	Uzbekistan	Concert hall	Piano, Conducting	Mozart–Concerto no. 20
17 Okseniuk, Jonathan	3	Boy	USA	Private home	Conducting	Beethoven–Symphony no. 5
18 Paddler16	5	Girl	Japan	Concert hall	Piano	Bach–Gigue
19 Paul, Malaki	9	Boy	UK	TV talent show	Voice	Beyonce–Listen
20 Rockaz0	4?	Boy	Malaysia?	Concert hall	Drums	Jet and Backhearts–I hate myself for loving you
21 Thehypnoguy1	6-8?	1 girl, 4 boys	North Korea	TV Concert	Guitar	?
22 Trifonov, Daniil	8	Boy	Rusland	Concert hall	Piano	Glinka–Nocturne; Burattino's Adventures (own composition)
23 Tsung, Tsung	5	Boy	Hong Kong	Private home	Piano	Water–Floodtime; Bach–Air

Question marks indicate estimates or unconfirmed sources (e.g. user comments).

Table 19.3 Audience statistics

Name	Views	Likes	Dislikes	Comments	Likes per 100 ratings*	Dislikes per 100 ratings*	Response per 1000 views*
Paul, Malaki	24,549,780	139,324	3,108	35,430	98	2	7
Bear, Emily	24,215,954	74,876	7,210	n/a	91	9	n/a
Thehypnoguy1	10,874,794	54,452	3,046	28,883	95	5	8
Camara, Akim	10,845,139	28,272	1,601	3,867	95	5	3
Okseniuk, Jonathan	8,044,802	15,869	504	5,241	97	3	3
Lee, Shuan Hern	7,855,255	24,558	826	10,714	97	3	5
Paddler16	6,607,371	16,509	1,140	15,882	94	6	5
Tsung, Tsung	4,621,077	39,923	895	10,080	98	2	11
Hoffman, Richard	3,997,892	5,375	584	3,821	90	10	2
Eunju, Kang	3,944,364	5,509	178	2678	97	3	2
Kahane, Brianna	1,839,992	10,331	924	1,592	92	8	7
Koo, Tiffany	1,190,207	4,809	197	2,190	96	4	6
Rockaz0	951,360	3,304	62	708	98	2	4
Akabubu2002	711,302	2,292	118	522	95	5	4
Ehrenfried, Mark	270,878	861	364	446	70	30	6
George, Gavin	257,823	1,484	33	305	98	2	7
Bortnick, Ethan	252,846	334	67	353	83	17	3
Garrett, Umi	204,629	1,087	43	537	96	4	8
Deutscher, Alma	190,322	914	16	91	98	2	5
Trifonov, Daniil	130,992	568	33	80	95	5	5
Levanon, Yoav	86,256	515	14	59	97	3	7
Koffi, Yannick	18,919	86	7	44	92	8	7
Mukumiy, Nuron	8,687	39	2	37	95	5	9

Data retrieved on 23 April 2013.

*Ratings includes likes and dislikes; Response is the sum of likes, dislikes, and comments.

Although views correspond to unique visitors (i.e. IP addresses), none of these numbers represent individual users or audience members because one user may leave multiple comments and more than one person may be watching from the same PC.

From the outset it is important to note that our sampling technique resulted in no videos from China and South Korea being deemed eligible for inclusion despite our efforts to include prodigy videos from a wide variety of nations and an expectation that YouTube examples from these two countries in particular might have been **expected**.

Appendix A provides a selection of written comments for each video at the time we settled on the final examples (i.e. April 2013). Some of the children in these videos are clearly exceptional and would fit into the definition of a musical prodigy, as defined for this book. However, we realize that some of our examples (e.g. Richard Hoffman, Tiffany Koo, Paul Malaki, “Rockaz0,” and

“Thehypnoguy1”) might easily be contested for at least two reasons. First, there is insufficient evidence through other videos to substantiate that they exhibit extraordinary levels of musical talent that is consistent across a repertoire within the idiom in which they specialize. A second reason is their young age (one is aged 3 and another 4), which makes it difficult to ascertain whether their natural gifts will eventually lead to the blossoming of a talent that could be described as a fully fledged musical prodigy. Whilst recognizing that the general public often base their perceptions of a ~~child~~ prodigy on the degree of commercial success, uniqueness, or novelty exhibited by the child, psychological frameworks focus on the level of talent achieved and it would be expected that this classification would only be used for children who are extremely (1:100,000) or perhaps exceptionally (1:10,000) gifted (Gagné, 2010).

However, it is important to note that YouTube was only formally launched in 2005, so its history and development into a mainstream media platform is still relatively new. For this reason, the date of the recording we include in our collection is not always given and may have been recorded many years prior to when it was uploaded. The video of Daniil Trifonov, for example, was uploaded in 2011 but shows a competition performance dating from 1999 (as stated in the video description). Ages spread out evenly in the range from 3 (Akim Camara, Richard Hoffmann) to 10 years old (Yannick Koffi).

While all these young performers are shown in performance, the settings vary widely (see Table 19.2), and range from the private settings of family homes, which are often marked by a child dressed in pajamas (Jonathan Okseniuk, Tsung Tsung¹), through to the traditional concert hall (e.g. Paddler16²) and several TV formats (e.g. Gavin George). Table 19.3 displays viewing statistics and audience response, and lists the 23 videos according to the number of views, which we used to assess popularity. For a complete understanding of the user comments and ratings in terms of audience response, it is important to note that only a small number of viewers provide comments or respond by indicating whether they like or dislike the video. These user comments (Appendix A) frequently contain exclamations of praise, as well as concern about whether the child has been exposed to a “normal” childhood as described more fully below.

A comparison of musical prodigies across two centuries

Our YouTube examples demonstrate that musical prodigies continue to exist today, and that there is a wide audience who are interested in their talents. This popularity is expressed in productive as well as receptive aspects of performance; there are parents willing to expose their children to a large audience, children who are seemingly cooperative and able to perform at a high level, a substantial amount of viewers for prodigy videos, and attention from other (traditional or “official”) media channels including newspapers and television. The structure and typical user experience of the online platform make a systematic analysis of these different contexts difficult, which is one of the reasons why we chose to focus on a qualitative experience-oriented approach. Whereas the typical 19th-century concert visitor was a German-speaking member of the upcoming educated elite and middle class in Western Europe, prodigy audiences today are dominated by English-speaking online media consumers.

¹ Tsung Tsung’s English name is Andy Lee, but he became known in English media under (the phonetic transcription of) his Chinese name. The video description states “Hi all, I love Fds [sic] call me Tsung Tsung more than Andy Lee ...”.

² User names (e.g. Paddler16, Akabubu2002) are used when real names are not explicitly given in the video title, description or content.

Although the settings vary, the traditional concert hall remains a common location: 14 out of 23 videos show a traditional stage plus audience, either in a traditional concert setting, or as part of a TV broadcast or documentary. In contrast with previous eras, a new phenomenon is the possibility of launching a prodigy career from the living room. A good example from our selection is Tsung Tsung, who was invited to perform on *The Ellen Show* after his home-recorded video had gone “viral” some months earlier (<http://youtu.be/6dLkyJJ4x3s>, accessed January 6, 2014). Besides his highly developed skills on the piano, the home video shows many signs of an anxiety-free and “authentic” childhood—a relaxed and spontaneous child, engaging in a playful game with his father. This image would seem to contradict any suspicion of abuse or evidence that he has been coerced into practicing and may have contributed to his widespread embrace by Western media. However, his clearly more apprehensive and orchestrated performance on the American talk show justifies a second consideration of his individuality and pleasure in his current public profile. For example, *The Huffington Post* (8 November 2012) reported that:

... Tsung was noticeably less smiley than he was when we first fell in love. In fact, he was almost deadly serious, clad in a snazzy white tux instead of his usual pajamas. Luckily all his dramatic moves were still there, including a new closer he whipped out in which he throws his hands up “like a gymnast after a golden Olympic performance”.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/08/tsung-tsung-5-year-old-pianist_n_2089942.html
(accessed 6 January 2014)

Despite the different aim and method, it is worth comparing our findings with the historiographic study by Kopiez (2011). First, the piano remains a popular instrument among prodigies today, with composition and improvisation being far less common than the “reproductive” aspects of performance in the classical tradition. As in the cases of Alma Deutscher and Emily Bear, instances of these privileged creative skills are typically highlighted with explicit references to Mozart. Another point of distinction with historical concert announcements appears in video titles; age remains a defining and distinctive characteristic of prodigies. The age range remains similar, with the youngest prodigies performing in public at the age of 3. Furthermore, the data confirm the trend of increasing complexity of the performed repertoire among piano prodigies (Lehmann, 2006; Lehmann & Ericsson, 1998). Older prodigies master full-length recital repertoire at a very high technical and expressive level, and the repertoire is usually restricted to standard works of the classical canon with Mozart, Bach, and Chopin being common choices.

Our examples diverge from Kopiez’s findings with regard to the “blossoming time” of prodigies, which appears to lie at a much younger age. For example, the YouTube example Paddler16 has continued to upload videos on a regular basis since 2007, but later videos (showing the Japanese girl up until her current age of 9 years) do not nearly approach the multiple millions of views that mark her most popular performances at ages 5 and 3. The same trend was found for other prodigies for whom multiple videos can be found. On this point, it does not appear likely that the popularity of the earliest videos, as one might expect, simply results from the longer period over which these videos have been online, because a comparison between the dates of upload and number of views shows a random rather than systematic relationship (see Table 19.4). Although not yet performing at the level of an adult professional, the potential itself apparently provides enough attraction for her viewing audience. In this way, age works as an inverted measure of exceptionality.

User comments show a range of responses that are generally more varied than the historical newspaper critiques and philosophical reflections. However, many similarities are still evident.

Table 19.4 Viewing data in chronological order

	Name	Date added	Views
1	Paddler16	4 February 2007	6,607,371
2	Bortnick, Ethan	18 May 2007	252,846
3	Koo, Tiffany	18 December 2007	1,190,207
4	Bear, Emily	15 May 2008	24,215,954
5	Mukumiy, Nuron	4 September 2008	8,687
6	Camara, Akim	17 October 2008	10,845,139
7	Hoffman, Richard	24 October 2008	3,997,892
8	Garrett, Umi	22 February 2009	204,629
9	Eunju, Kang	28 February 2009	3,944,364
10	Koffi, Yannick	9 October 2009	18,919
11	Kahane, Brianna	18 January 2010	1,839,992
12	Okseniuk, Jonathan	15 March 2010	8,044,802
13	Lee, Shuan Hern	28 April 2010	7,855,255
14	Rockaz0	7 July 2010	951,360
15	Ehrenfried, Mark	28 August 2010	270,878
16	Akabubu2002	21 March 2011	711,302
17	Levanon, Yoav	2 April 2011	86,256
18	Thehypnoguy1	3 May 2011	10,874,794
19	Trifonov, Daniil	8 July 2011	130,992
20	Deutscher, Alma	31 December 2011	190,322
21	Tsung, Tsung	11 February 2012	4,621,077
22	Paul, Malaki	28 April 2012	24,549,780
23	George, Gavin	1 August 2012	257,823

For example, negative responses still focus on suspected abuse, parental pressure, commercial interest, or excessive involuntary practice. Examples include the following:

This is a complete humiliation. The child is five years old and being forced to play this song. Thumbs down! I'm sorry.

(10xPIXELZOOM, on Paddler16; our translation)

She'll get a beating if she screws it up

(Amanda Evans, on Akabubu2002)

I bet if she messed up on a note she would've been beaten to death. Not wishing it upon her she's amazing but hey its N. Korea :D

(Roxysurf3r, on Eunju)

Poor children! Robbed of your childhood, cheated of your future—for out of a hundred prodigies [Wunderkinder] barely ten become adult wonders [Wundermänner]—the plaything of the whims of the monster “audience” Don’t you belong as well in the pitiful chapter of child abuses?

(Anonymous, cited in Fuchs, 2003, p. 52; our translation)

The first three comments were found online. However, an unknown visitor to a prodigy concert that took place in 1904 scribbled the fourth comment on the back of a program booklet. In a remarkably similar tone, each expresses concern for the child’s well-being, fed by an unconcealed claim about involuntary and excessive (even totalitarian) subordination to practice. Each of these comments serves to illustrate the difficulty—and, by extension, the common refusal—to consider the possibility that these prodigies may in fact enjoy what they are doing, and have been exposed to a supportive learning environment. Instead, stereotypes about prodigies abound, with a common belief being that “There’s something not right about this ...” (comment on Garrett, see similar examples in Appendix A).

Video comments, descriptions, and content reveal that the most typical markers of success have hardly changed. For example, the invitation to perform for a highly regarded audience (royalty, presidential) remains a privilege that confirms the exceptionality and realness of a prodigy. A successful prodigy, both around 1800 and currently, is often described as a traveling virtuoso who performs regularly in major concert halls for high status audiences. Audience comments on YouTube further suggest that the common experts from the past (teachers, scientists, music critics, professionals) maintain a form of legitimacy in the present.

The corporate media provide further legitimacy for prodigies on YouTube, at least from a mainstream consumer audience point of view. In a similar way, the nonprofit competition may provide a ground of authority from the point of view of an educated elite, although many conservatory-trained professionals denounce the pointless rivalry and standards of “safe” interpretative style evoked by competitions. Both settings suggest that a prodigy has reached a less accessible channel of publicity beyond the stage of YouTube. If a performance at the royal court in London was a typical milestone of prodigies c.1800, today’s equivalent may be an invitation to perform for prominent talk show hosts such as Ellen DeGeneres. This is evidenced by the fact that numerous exceptional individuals have shown their talents on *The Ellen Show* over the past years, including four of the 23 prodigies—Emily Bear, Umi Garrett, Tsung Tsung, Ethan Borthnick—selected for discussion here.

The “suggested videos” lists and the “small-world” phenomenon discussed above, enable easy navigation and increase the likelihood that a viewer will not watch just one, but several prodigy videos in a row. The high amount of positive ratings as shown in Table 19.3 adds further specificity to the online prodigy niche. In contrast with the infrequent number of prodigy concerts in the early 19th century, it might be expected that audiences today have seen multiple examples of prodigies across various aspects of human accomplishment. This has a major effect on prodigies’ capacity to amaze their audiences, because it allows direct comparison (and competition) between prodigies.

YouTube’s archival function not only produces a space for verification and comparison, as evidenced by comments such as “You should watch her other videos if you think it’s a fake” (comment about Paddler16 by Jfmamjjsond231), but also enables access to various performances of a single prodigy by providing insights into the ongoing musical development across several years. An answer to the classically future-oriented question: “What will become of this 3-year-old?” has consequently turned from rhetoric and musing into an answerable question. Although the question may still be used to express amazement or concern, it takes little effort to find the answer online. Curiosity about the fulfillment of a prodigy’s future promise makes biographic channels

a compelling resource for exploration. In this regard it is relevant to note that every user has a personal channel, but ~~only~~ few use it to systematically collect performances of (and on behalf of) a single prodigy (only four of our examples—Alma Deutscher, Paddler16, Umi Garret, Tiffany Koo—adopted a biographic channel of this kind). Although parents seem to have an initiating role in these channels and user names, it should not be overlooked that children are nowadays more than likely to know their way around YouTube.

For example, when first confronted with the most popular video of then 5-year old Paddler16, it is relatively easy to discover that a steady musical development has followed since the video was uploaded in 2007. The descriptions of all her videos repeat her wish to become “a world-wide [*sic*] pianist”. The thousands of subscribers to her channel and comments in a range of languages testify that this wish has already been fulfilled, but neither traces of official media attention nor successful competition participation has been found. It must be noted that the search for information about this prodigy was severely limited because she does not show her full name. Given the consistent use of a pseudonym, we could speculate about the degree to which she or her parents *really* want her to be widely known, and the reasons why her parents have not done more to promote her talent through other (online and offline) media channels. There seem to be no performances beyond her hometown, no competitions, and no attention from official media. Reasons for this might be varied: modesty, naivety, protection, or lack of opportunity. Given these contradictions, we might therefore speculatively classify this Japanese girl as a highly precocious young performer who has ambitious parents, rather than a musical prodigy in the strictest sense. Another possibility is that the now 9-year-old is much more self-determined than we might assume, and that she has already taken over the practice of archiving her own performances.

Popularity, audience, consumers

Using the viewing rates as an indication of exposure and recognition shows that all but two of the prodigies listed in Table 19.3 have reached over 50,000 views, with half of the videos reaching over a million views, four up to ten million, and two over 24 million. Such high viewing rates are consistent with assertions that confirmation of prodigiousness can be partly attributed to publicity and fame (Feldman, 1994; Ruthsatz & Urbach, 2012; Stevens, 1982; see also de Mink, 2013).

How might we account for the fact that some videos attracted a larger audience than others? A classification of “average” and “exceptional” prodigies is hard to provide on the basis of these viewing rates. The top two videos reached over 24 million views. The first, which some might question as a true child prodigy, is a rendition of Beyoncé’s “Listen” on *Britain’s Got Talent* in 2012. In this example, Malaki’s stage fright produces tears halfway through his first attempt, but his second attempt at the song shows a very talented (if not prodigious) singer. It could be argued that Malaki’s participation in a live TV show that is viewed by millions of people might be the cause of such a high number of hits. One might also question the degree to which the popularity of the video is the result of an emotional reaction from viewers who were attracted to the video because his first attempt at performing the song was so traumatic. The second video, a more robust example of a child prodigy, has attracted viewers over a longer period since 2008 with a documentary/news item on Emily Bear, announced as “the Next Mozart”. In third place, and again a questionable example of a true prodigy, is Thehypnogy1’s “North Korean children playing guitar: *Creepy as Hell*” which stands out as the only ensemble performance in the survey and an example that undoubtedly has complex connotations related to state propaganda and anti-dictatorial sentiment that have probably helped to drive the “viral” hype surrounding this video.

Other top videos include those of 3-year-olds Akim Camera on violin (with Andre Rieu) and Jonathan Okseniuk conducting in his living room, which are both examples of musically talented,

but not necessarily prodigy, children that have attracted great interest from viewers probably because they are novel and unexpected examples of children's musical performances. The fact that commercial TV stations produced most of the top-rated videos may have contributed, but offers no guarantee for high viewing rates. Conversely, it is noteworthy that some of the home recordings have produced exceptionally high hit rates comparable with professional media productions. In this way, the number of viewings is not necessarily affected by setting, country, expertise, repertoire, or gender.

With a mere 8,000 views, the video of Nuron Mukumiy is the least viewed in this survey. However, the performance itself is one of the more convincing examples of a "true prodigy". Among other aspects, this video is exceptional because it shows a piano prodigy who is also an expressive and skilled conductor. What may be "wrong" with this prodigy performance then, insofar as the number of views lags far behind the other prodigy videos? It may be that this video is better understood as a record stored for private purposes than a deliberate attempt to reach a public of millions, and as such offers the opportunity to assess talent in a domain where audience size appears unaffected by "viral" internet hypes, profit-oriented management, and media attention.

Mark Ehrenfried's video stands out not because of a small audience, but due to an unusual amount of negative ratings. While other videos received well over 90 "likes" per 100 ratings (the sum of likes and dislikes), this example does not reach beyond 70 (see Table 19.3). Users refer to this performer as a "fake" and a "performing monkey," and note that the video seems to have been dubbed. Is this a real prodigy? What causes the controversy? Two aspects deserve mentioning. First, the performance setting is unusual—not a black Steinway but a cartoon-style coloured grand piano, disco lights, and montage in the style of a video clip. This example looks like a concert or a performance for TV, but no audience is visible. On the left a few other musicians appear briefly. The musicians shown seem to be playing along with a pre-recorded audio track. It is possible also that the piano part that we hear was played and recorded live during the shoot. Secondly, Mark does not play standard classical repertoire in an acoustic setting, but a work titled *Rhapsody in Rock* by Brabham. The flashy staging comes closer to a pop star image akin to Liberace or Justin Bieber than the "serious" classical virtuoso that appears in many other videos. One user remarked:

this is sad ... another kid with a pile of talent being whored out to commercialism! He's not even a teenager and he's already more concerned with how crazy and over-the-top he comes across than he is with the delivery of the instrument. He is preoccupied with the showmanship side of it and that will eventually lead to a lack of feeling in his music ... another great talent has been tainted!

(Ryan Sullivan, comment on Ehrenfried)

At one point where one would expect him to be most engaged with the difficult notes Mark indeed turns his head to smile into the camera in a way that is reminiscent of Liberace. Perhaps it was playback after all. But a short browsing session through other videos by this young musician nonetheless confirms that he is a highly talented child who, unlike other children of his age, performs at public concerts, receives media attention, and has experienced commercial success with the release of a CD album before the age of 10 (<http://www.markehrenfried.de/biographie.html>, accessed 6 January 2014). The triggering of so many negative responses might be due to the impression of flashy, unattractive, and now somewhat dated commercial "packaging."

Prodigious talent versus commercial success, critical acclaim and public attention

The videos of our 23 young musicians have all been uploaded on the commercial platform of YouTube. Within this context, the wider flows of online media, in which some videos go "viral"

and others do not, suggests that various social, corporate, individual, and even historical forces all influence how viewers have perceived the musical talents of the children discussed here. The level to which our perceptions of child prodigies are influenced by commercial packaging and scripted marketing strategies raises the question of how authentic these young individuals' musical talents might be, as well as the extent to which they might be classified as true musical prodigies as opposed to children who have been privileged to experience commercial success, critical acclaim, and much public attention. Therefore we could question whether uniqueness and authenticity are adequate ways to conceptualize children's musical talent, especially when our perceptions are so clearly limited.

We cite two examples as evidence that the capacity of prodigies to convey an image of authentic individuality is linked to and restricted by a very specific Western and adult conception of "normal" childhood. The first is a video where Tsung Tsung is invited to perform on *The Ellen Show* (<http://youtu.be/6dLkyJJ4x3s>, accessed 6 January 2014). At a certain point, talk show host Ellen DeGeneres asks: "Who is your favorite composer?" The 5-year-old replies: "Mozart". To cite the adult female translator, sitting at his side, he continues: "I love Mozart, because his music is beautiful and he is a child prodigy pianist. I want to be like him" (1:30–1:52). In sync with this answer, pictures of a young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart appear on the screen in the studio background. A second, more complex, example concerns the video of Shuan Hern Lee's performance on *Australia's Got Talent* (see Table 19.1). Following a smooth delivery of *Flight of The Bumblebee*, the "shock jock" Kyle Sandilands, a middle-aged, bearded, white male jury member confronts the 7-year-old with the following questions:

Jury member: Good, I loved it, I loved it. Can I ask you a question, "off the record?" Are you being forced against your will to play the piano? [Audience bursts out in laughter; the camera shows their faces. The child remains out of sight.] You are doing it because you want to? [Shuan Hern Lee finally appears in view, smiles, and stumbles]

Shuan Hern Lee: Yes, I like it. [the jury member interrupts before the sentence is finished]

Jury member: You are not carrying out the dream of your mother or father. You wanna do this?

Shuan Hern Lee: I like it myself. (Lee, 3:18–3:35; our transcript)

In both examples, the adult expert shows interest in the prodigy's personal motivations. Yet both times the given answer falls so neatly within the lines of expectation that it is hard to believe that it is authentic, honest, and spontaneous. This point shows how difficult it is to perceive a prodigy's individuality, or subjective "voice," even when prodigies are actually speaking about what they like. In the case of Tsung Tsung, we cannot help but think of the TV producer and parent, who possibly instructed or led the child's answer to this question because the image of Mozart in the background reveals that the answer was anticipated and probably scripted. In this sense, such images and statements feed stereotypes that we might be seeing the "next Mozart".

It is worth considering how the dialogue continues. Directly after, DeGeneres steers the conversation towards a more mundane desire. Tsung Tsung would like to own a dog and has already made up a name for his pet, which can be translated as "Teddy and Little Floral Print" (1:58–2:17). His wish to have a dog, in contrast with the previous question, makes him to some extent "different from all other prodigies". It sounds like a more plausible and authentic desire for a 5-year-old and conveys the message that Tsung is nonetheless a child "like every other child". However, it strongly resonates with a narrative that returns in all documentary format prodigy videos selected for discussion in this chapter by presenting the image of a Mozart-like, precocious, and exceptional young musician who is nonetheless a "normal" child—worrisome, playful, enjoying "child-like" things and activities.

The documentary videos of Gavin George and Ethan Borthnick provide textbook examples of this image. Consider the opening seconds of the former. First, it is established that this is a

prodigy: we see and hear the boy playing Chopin's well-known and challenging *Fantasy Impromptu* on piano, we hear him stating his name and age, and the title frame reads "Gavin George: nine-year-old piano prodigy". His teacher confirms that he is "incredibly gifted; he is a prodigy among prodigies" (0:10–0:13). The notion of a normal and happy childhood appears immediately after, as if to counter any claims that he might be forced to practice against his will. This shows Gavin playing with his brother, eating ice cream, and reading a book amidst his toys. The teacher's voice continues: "he likes Star Wars, he likes Lego, ... he is such a real kid" (0:15–0:18). The happy and cheerful child was already present in his cheerful voice during the opening seconds. To complete the picture, a generously smiling face accompanies the main title frame (0:30).

Ethan Borthnick's video opens with a strikingly similarity. This time, the images of prodigy and normal child appear in the opposite order. After a shot of the boy going down a bright yellow slide (with a cheerful piano tune in the background), the screen turns black to highlight the text "Ethan Borthnick is a normal 6-year-old boy" (0:05). The playground scene continues with the laughing boy in a game of catch. Written statements follow ("He likes playing with his friends", "He is like any other kid his age ...") (0:10–0:17) and introduce the first shots of the prodigy playing the piano ("except for one thing ... Ethan is a musical prodigy" (0:34)).

As a contrasting example, Emily Bear's video emphasizes her prodigious achievements and focuses on a piano room throughout the first minutes. The image of normal childhood appears only after 3 minutes when the voice-over remarks that "... it's easy to forget that Emily *is* still a child" (3:19–3:24). At that point, Emily is briefly shown introducing her collection of stuffed toys. The documentary finishes with her response to the question as to what she finds the most important thing that people remember about her: "... actually, I'm just a normal kid that plays piano" (3:47–3:49).

Reflecting back to the earlier cited video, the encounter between Shuan Hern Lee and the jury member presents an instance in which the reassuring image of normal childhood is absent. The result is a less innocent picture that arguably feeds into stereotypes of Asian children and the home environment to which they are exposed. The white adult's worry about being pushed to practice is expressed in what may seem to be a harmless mocking of the stereotype. He poses the question of being forced and yet he does not really pose it. However, the damage follows from the fact that there is neither room nor appropriate words available for a truthful and honest response, other than providing the interviewer with an answer that he would expect. The first, suggestive and almost rhetorical, question is swiftly rephrased in a series of even less tactful questions, which all steer towards only one desirable and acceptable answer: "Yes I like it, I like it myself". Rather than a sincere interest in the nurturing and supportive conditions under which Lee reached his level of pianistic virtuosity, this jury member's questions seem to be motivated by a concern about his own human decency.

Through his line of questioning, the jury member reminds us of the global parenting debate ignited by Amy Chua in her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011), where Western styles of parenting, built on respect and nurturing of the child's individuality, were compared with Chinese mothers who are seen to be more authoritarian through their efforts to arm their child with the skills, strong work habits, and inner confidence they believe is essential for future success.

We might even consider whether there would be any way that the child might have been allowed to provide a different answer such as: "Yes, I am forced against my will". Such a response would not only have unforeseeable consequences regarding the relation to his family, but would also add a considerable weight to the entire TV show, its hosts, and most of all the laughing audience. So, in a more stringent way, this excerpt shows how a prodigy's capability to speak is strongly moderated, encapsulated, and foreclosed by adults. With this in mind, the huge success of Tsung Tsung's (home) video from overseas that lead to the invitation by Ellen DeGeneres can be understood as,

in large part, enabled by signs of pleasure; even though his father is clearly challenging and directing him to practice, the packaging of this effort into a game is so effective that we witness one of the most joyful prodigies on the internet (see Appendix B for a transcript of the conversation). The only competing example of authentic pleasure expressed by a prodigy is the 3-year-old Jonathan who, likewise in pajamas, conducts his imaginary orchestra in sync with the CD recording played to him. His motivation to perform seems to be more truly “intrinsic” because there is no parent giving clear instructions, although it is quite likely that the attention of being filmed and praised after finishing the rendition would have been an important incentive to perform.

These examples show how hard it is to perceive of individuality in prodigy performances. Even if a trace appears, we can never be sure whether they are real or fabricated. The interactions in which prodigies are able to speak are strongly determined by adult conceptions of childhood, cultural stereotypes, and Mozart-likeness. Signs of pleasure comfort viewers because they imply that the child is participating voluntarily, and thus alleviate concerns about underlying forces that may be seen as improper or inappropriate for a child’s normal development.

Concluding comments

As we have noted throughout this chapter, adult conceptions of child rearing practices and what is considered a “normal” childhood are a recurring theme in YouTube performances of musical prodigies. This is not a new phenomenon. Kopiez (2011) notes that the idea of childhood was an important driver for the rise of public interest in musical prodigies in Europe c.1800. Norms and ideas of “average” childlike behavior only developed over the course of the 17th century (cf. Ariès, 1962), and without these norms prodigies would not have the same capacity to stand out as exceptional. A second consideration, according to Kopiez, concerns the rise of prodigy performances that coincided with developing views on human individualism. These fueled a shift of views in which group membership, birth status, demographic–economic background, and religious belief, all “lost determining power to explain individual outstanding achievements” (Kopiez, 2011, p. 226). In short, prodigies amazed their audiences because they resisted rational explanation.

The musicologist Carolyn Abbate expands further on this issue. In her seminal article “Outside Ravel’s tomb” (Abbate, 1999), the idea of the “tombeau,” which features in two of Maurice Ravel’s major works, is described in terms of how musical automatons, human (adult) performers, and musical prodigies share an “uncanny” association with a dead shell or box, which is “animated from within”. In Abbate’s view, the prodigy experience (i.e. to witness a prodigy) can be partly explained as a conflict between discursive categories in aesthetic thought, namely the idea of human individuality (to which Abbate refers as the Enlightenment “subject”) on the one hand, and the mind–body dualism on the other.

Abbate (1999) emphasizes that the male disembodied human mind is the exclusive location of soul and consciousness such that the idealist *subject* is an adult. Children, in contrast, are not commonly considered to have access to full consciousness and “real” adult emotions. This perspective leads Abbate to describe the sensation caused by prodigies as follows: “Perhaps we are disturbed by the spectacle of adult thought, perfectly reproduced by the small laborer, who, we assume, cannot experience the emotions he or she mimics” (p. 480). By directing our attention to the abilities of the child, this statement touches on the limitations of “us,” adult observers, who assume certain limitations on the child’s part. With the discussion of audience response throughout this chapter in mind, it becomes clear that the aesthetic ideas held when we privilege adults in this way are still forcefully present throughout society.

It might also be argued that the focus in research on prodigies as individuals (whether oriented toward abilities or achievements) is a sign that modern humanism still prevails in current thought.

Children's capacities to perform as "proper" individual subjects, to perform on an adult level (e.g. by experiencing "adult" emotions) turns out to be systematically underestimated through the performances of the most gifted and talented musical prodigies. Furthermore, this objectification of childhood severely limits the possibility of perceiving prodigies as active, creative, and authentic subjects. Conversely, adults' superior capacities to perceive, are presupposed without further question. The discussion of adult "experts" earlier in this chapter was precisely what motivated us to challenge this imbalance by questioning the authority of those adults who have a particularly strong voice in prodigy assemblages.

It is clear from our survey that YouTube will continue to serve as a rich source for discussions on musical prodigies. All around the world, the general public now has greater access to seeing and hearing musical prodigies than at any time throughout history. It is quite remarkable that, since 2005, YouTube has exploded with video uploads of children performing music at all levels of ability. Some of the videos depict children who are without any doubt prodigies. An interesting question, however, is whether the ease of gaining access to these examples will result in a desensitization by the viewing public, such that they expect even greater accomplishments from children in order to appreciate their efforts. In this regard we are reminded of our earlier discussion of Gagné's categories defining extreme (1:100,000) and exceptional (1:10,000) forms of giftedness (Gagné, 2010). We also recognize that the bar is continually being raised in a number of human endeavors, including music, such that children and adolescents around the world now regularly exceed the description by Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993) of the 10,000 hours needed to achieve expert levels of performance. With this in mind, and given the high levels of burn out and natural attrition for prodigies who never realize their own (or their parents) musical dreams as adults, we might also ask: "We love prodigies when they are young, but will we still love them when they are adults?"

Author's note

This chapter is based on the first author's research master thesis entitled *Musical prodigies: Past, present, and future perspectives on exceptional performance and creativity*, which was awarded by Utrecht University in 2013 and is available online at <http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/student-theses/2013-0708-200613/UUindex.html> (accessed 6 January 2014).

References

- Abbate, C. (1999). Outside Ravel's tomb. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 52, 465–530.
- Ariès, P. (1962). *Centuries of childhood: A social history of family life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Burgess, J. & Green, J. (2009). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Chua, A. (2011). *Battle hymn of the tiger mother*. New York: Penguin.
- de Mink, F.M. (2013). *Musical prodigies: Past, present and future perspectives on exceptional performance and creativity*. Unpublished master's thesis. Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands.
- Ericsson, K.A., Krampe, R.T., & Tesch-Römer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological Review*, 100, 363–406.
- Feldman, D.H. (1994). Mozart and the transformational imperative. In J.M. Morris (Ed.), *On Mozart* (pp. 52–71). New York: Woodrow Wilson Center.
- Fuchs, I. (2003). Bewunderungswerthes Kind! Deß fertigkeit Man Preißt ... Beispiele der Beurteilung musikalischer Wunderkinder vom 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert. In I. Bodscho, O. Biba, & I. Fuchs (Eds.), *Beethoven und andere Wunderkinder: Wissenschaftliche Beiträge und Katalog zur Ausstellung* (pp. 29–58). Bonn: Stadtmuseum Bonn.
- Gagné, F. (2010). Motivation within the DMGT 1.0 framework. *High Ability Studies*, 21, 81–99.

- Kopiez, R.** (2011). The musical child prodigy (wunderkind) in music history: A historiometric analysis. In I. Deliège & J.A. Sloboda (Eds.), *Music and the mind: Essays in honour of John Sloboda* (pp. 225–36). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lehmann, A.C.** (2006). Historical increases in expert music performance skills: Optimizing instruments, playing techniques, and training. In E. Altenmüller, M. Wiesendanger, & J. Kesselring (Eds.), *Music, motor control and the brain* (pp. 3–24). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lehmann, A.C., & Ericsson, K.A.** (1998). Historical developments of expert performance: Public performance of music. In A. Steptoe (Ed.), *Genius and the mind: Studies of creativity and temperament* (pp. 67–96). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ruthsatz, J., & Urbach, J.B.** (2012). Child prodigy: A novel cognitive profile places elevated general intelligence, exceptional working memory and attention to detail at the root of prodigiousness. *Intelligence*, 40, 419–26.
- Stevens, G.-H.** (1982). *Das Wunderkind in der Musikgeschichte*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, Germany.

Appendix A Selected comments

Akabubu2002

She'll get a beating if she screws it up (Amanda Evans)

I wonder how many times her parents beat her (Orangetacowings)

I can't imagine how harsh the rehearsal she's been through

(Dindanight97)

[...]Yea sorry I was kinda angry after watching 50 videos with little children playing better than me: D (Dundo Der Dummo) [excerpt of an argument between two users on Asian culture]

I wish my parents had forced me:P

(Piano0b)

No child can match the passion of an older, more mature pianist. They simply do not have the soul. You can try and replicate it, you may come close, but it will not be the same.

(WhiteFox0098)

When I listen to players at this young age there is usually something immature about their playing. Mechanical phrasing, missed notes, etc. This young lady has GOT IT!! Can I talk to you about studying in the US. and getting a free college education?? WOW!

(Kirk Overmoe)

Bear, Emily

[No comments available for this video]

Bortnick, Ethan

I think what sets this kid apart is his perception on music. How he pulls out a piece from that big pile of music, can actually REMEMBER what it sounds like and say, "that's a beautiful piece" astounds me. I can barely remember what I played 3 or 4 months ago sounds like, and I'm 14! And I don't think I started really thinking of pieces as beautiful until I was 11 or 12 on flute and I'd been playing piano for 5 years before that. His perception is just mind-bogglingly mature for his age.

(OhEmGeeItsHAYLEY)

It's not like they are automatically born with the ability to do the things they do. They have to work at it just like the rest of us. The difference is between "normal" people and "prodigies" is simply in the way we focus and learn and dedicate ourselves to our work. We all have the ability then to do as much as we are willing to set our minds to in reality.

(CKCHardrocka)

Camara, Akim

O... m... g wow! it took me 6 years to learn how to play the violin! o.O god bless him!!!

(Tori54595)

It's beautiful how did he learn to do that he's great someday I'll be one and ill practice really good so someday I'll be on a different show and I can practice ow crap I missed practice

(Stefen Roman)

Im... So... Normal...;

(Ally Eubanks)

Better than BIEBER:))

(Omuletze Omuletze)

He brightens my day.

(Mavis Connolly)

Deutscher, Alma

Hope you have enough space also for some childhood (Ulrich Becker)

Tears in my eyes, I wonder if this kid playing is more honest than a talented and accomplished.

(Hpsyche18)

I am a music teacher and this girl is a musical genius! no doubt about it. Look at her body, she can actually FEEL the music!! Alma, may YAHWEH bless you child. Thank you for reminding us how great our GOD is!

(Skyebox4j)

Ppl are funny. how is it possible that this young girl get only 100K+ Like while Lady Gaga get 1,000K+?

(1plus11000)

She is an incredible little girl, I love it when young people excel in things that they love and she more than excels. Plus she looks real cute in her beautiful dress and black shoes. Keep it up, you are wonderful.

(Miguel Morales)

I love the way she smiles at moments, it seem she really enjoys when she plays the violin. she is completely perfect.

(Ignatk)

Excellent indeed, I'm not jealous or anything:) I disagree with it being called talent though, I wonder whether these musical prodigies would have the same "talent" if they were given what my parents gave me, SPAM and a football;

(MrSweatyPants)

[In reply to MrSweatyPants, cited above] She composes her own music! How is that NOT talent? Background doesn't always mean that a person can't succeed. In interviews you can tell that she LOVES the music she plays. Don't put her down like that because of her upbringing. She is a prodigy of music that rivals even Mozart. If she hadn't found this as a child, she would have as an adult.

(RoCkbunny769)

Ehrenfried, Mark

This is sad. . . another kid with a pile of talent being whored out to commercialism! He's not even a teenager and he's already more concerned with how crazy and over-the-top he comes across then he is with the delivery of the instrument. He is preoccupied with the showmanship side of it and that will eventually lead to a lack of feeling in his music . . . another great talent has been tainted! (Ryan Sullivan) The facial expressions look forced and put-on for the cameras. It was an act. Also, I don't think he was playing live. I agree he is being forced into being a showman instead of just concentrating on playing the piano.

(Plica06)

This is a textbook example of exactly what you shouldn't do with promising young musicians. It's all overdone hair and coached stupid facial expressions. [...]

(Edmoore)

He is not doing to bad for himself. Mozart was a child prodigy and found great success . . . Also all musicians make facial expressions, if they are passionately into what they are playing. (Libertythemovement)

Haha love the kids facial expressions like "oh my gosh" and "help!!" hahah.

(Lizisback12)

I like how his hair "Dances" with the music! XD Haha

(Truce Le)

Overacting and sounds fake

(Bruno Piccicin)

Fantastic and he is so cute too!!!!

(Crazyvermozart)

Is this the same mark ehrenfried as in the other vids? no offense it's kind of scary kids can change from cute into a long haired freak . . . if they are the same i prefer this child appearance over the adult one. . .

(Misaki Migoto)

Eunju, Kang

She is a child, and very innocent.

(Tess1312)

Wow, now I REALLY have no excuse about not being able to play well . . . and to think I get upset cause I can't get my fingers to hit some of the notes and she has TINY hands and . . . ya, I am impressed!!

(Luvsdrew1010)

This little cute girl has very good guitar skills and she plays very good. But I feel sorry for her. She is living in North Korea and her life is probably very hard and strict. I am sad. I hope she manage to leave North Korea when she gets older. She is playing here, but I am pretty sure she suffer a lot in her daily life.

(ItsJustMeRightThere)

Most adult people won't be able to play this even if they work for this song till they die;) this girl is a crazy machine. i hope she loves playing ... most kids in her age are forced to practice to reach this level ...

(Patrik Schnell)

Amazing!! Kinda scary tho [sic]

(Tosspotjoepearce)

ASIAN AGAIN!

(Deepsea bond)

Evil korean parents ...

(XscXps3)

Garrett, Umi

Fucking amazing, because she is not asian kid.

(Rtretertery tertertertert [sic])

This is unbelievable. This child is a robot. I've been trying this etude for 30 years and still can't get through the first two pages

(Bthadani)

Wow!!!! She's a fantastic, at my 16 years I can't play that, she's a genius.

(Gabriel Sánchez)

Great. ... but that's in exchange for a normal childhood. ... There's something not right about this ...

(MrSimeon76)

I WILL add, however, that I HAVE seen kids on YouTube who I can tell are forced. And yes, many of them are Asian. But I've seen plenty of non-Asian kids who look miserable as well. But as a pianist with nearly nine years of experience, I can tell when a pianist enjoys their art and when they don't. Umi does. I don't deny that there aren't kids who are forced, but Umi isn't one of them. And, even though I myself am Asian, I am not either.

(EmilyBearfan) [This is one of many elaborate comments by the same user in reply to suggestions of abuse and Asian stereotyping.]

I have known Umi since she was 7 years old, she just turned 12 this past August. She started playing at age 4. She was very fortunate to be born into a loving family that recognized her talent and her love for the piano. No one forces her. Like most exceptional pianist the desire to play comes from inside of themselves. No one needs to tell them to go and practice the piano. This past summer she won 1st place at the Chopin International Piano Competition in Budapest, and 1st place in Osaka.

(58pianos)

George, Gavin

I played Chopin's Fantasia impromptu when I was 10

(Corey Misner)

This kid is going to have no problem attracting a classy girl when he's older, just the sheer natural talent he possesses strikes envy in me

(Carnax6969)

One day, that little boy will make some lucky girl very, very happy.

(Eddie Meyer)

I need to get a job so I can start taking lessons ...

(Burntshmallow)

Hi, I am a 17 year old piano player that has been playing for 14 years. If I tried to play what Gavin is playing now, it would take me 7–8 months just to play it slow. I am learning Prelude in C major by Chopin, and can barely tackle that. You have my greatest respects, Gavin.

(Crimsonskies455)

This is what I like to see. Kids doing amazingly well in the things that they love because they have a real passion for it, not because of pushy, selfish parents.

(24Pianist)

I'm so glad that his parents and teachers allow him to be a kid first

(Cooookiemonsterrrrr)

Can't wait to see this kid when he starts composing

(Badeggs13)

Does he compose yet though? ... and will he blend?

(LucidDream)

And he's not even asian ...

(Asd owe)

His playing technique is PERFECT!!

(Jonsson666)

This kid might actually be a prodigy. He is not only playing the notes correctly, but with amazing emotion and phrasing. ... I can usually tell when a "young prodigy" is playing, because though the notes are technically correct the phrasing is all wrong. I don't know where a nine year old gets the experience or the knowledge to play like this ... But he is truly talented. Good luck on your career

(Chopinbrain)

I don't believe Fantasia Impromptu and Liebestraum are prodigy territory at that age. That's "talented". Prodigy status is conferred from something like knowing all 24 Chopin Etudes, or all the Beethoven [sic] sonatas. Prodigies are by definition extraordinary, ala Magnus LeDue, or Josef Hofmann. If we loosen standards for what a prodigy is, then it loses all meaning.

(InsideOutBH)

Hoffman, Richard

We never actually see him playing the notes we hear; the melody is in the left hand and the accompaniment chords are in the right hand, but that is not what he is doing, as seen from the camera angle below him. Therefore I think this is a faked video. BTW, I am a piano teacher.

(Hardybar1)

Ridiculous. He's NOT a Prodigy. Big Dislike from me!

(LegolasArrow1)

Oh yes, the boy looks very very happy and enthusiastic! It makes me wanna puke when selfish parents raise their own children to infant prodigies for their own satisfaction. A big phenomenon first of all in Asia. Poor child ...

(Gwenifar100)

He's good

(Lotyk111)

I was impressed to see a 3 years old European child be a piano prodigy. But when I saw the Chinese mother and letters on the sheet, I understood and watched a cat video.

(gla950)

I was glad he picked his nose, that means he is a normal child. Asian parents are so competitive and pushy (if you have read Lang Lang's biography, you know what I am talking about)

(Senapinomoart)

It's like she wants him to be the new Mozart;)

(Maja Divalerio)

I totally agree with you, I am the same age as you and I wish my parents had forced me to keep learning piano (I let it off when I was 17 and still regret it)

(Senapinomoart)

Kahane, Brianna

BEST 7 YEARS OLD VIOLINIST AND IT'S NOT ASIAN! 0_0:0

(NEXIfilms)

I know! She not Asian!!! She blonde! Finally! A blonde prodigy!

(Darcy Fryer)

Goosebumps.

(1raiiner)

Fantastique!

(Jamila Bassaine)

Incredible! Imagine how good she'll be when she's 27 years old.

(Zennuts1)

She tells a story through a violin which is a virtue that is unteachable which I (as I am told) are also as lucky as her to possess. but I need to hone the skill as obviously there are violinists with such great passion towards their instrument that can impress far more than I can. Bravo.

(Hhhhhhhh7460)

Koffi, Yannick

This kid has definitely a bright future. ^_^

(Yarden2y)

Great Yannick!!!!:D

(Gianni Ansino)

Thank you Marlowe for helping me with my bass playing I hope someday I can meet you to learn more.

(Gervais Koffi) [this appears to be the actual prodigy speaking, through his father's account.]

[In reply to Gervais Koffi, cited above] Probably in a few years you can teach me with that progress:-) But thanks though.

(MarloweDK)

After watching this kid, I don't know if your my favorite bass player anymore Marlowe, Lol.

(Brian Fordlee)

Omg what an honer!!!! you had MarloweDK comment on your video dude you must be good

(Loyal2none132)

This is a great example for all the other 10 years olds to learn this piece. You are in the pocket and make a great groove, keep up the good work and would love to see more videos. Your bass lacks low end which is probably due to the mic on the camera which is EQ'd for voice. Andre

(TheFrostedGlass)

Hey now. This isn't "complex"

(Littlebones18)

Koo, Tiffany

The "stereotyped" strict Asian parents only comes from when immigrants come to live in western countries and see opportunities for their children to be successful and earn money. This is why they push their children against their will and "make" their talents.

(Slovenijajenajboljsi)

I hate that ... when little white girl plays: ohhhh she's wonderful!!!! when asian girl plays: hooooo, poor girl, I'm sure her parents force her to play

(Ollyuzr)

I played this for my senior recital and it didn't sound like this at all. does she teach:)

(Heidi Chartier)

Lee, Shuan Hern

Anything you can do a 7 year Asian can do better.

(Jake Hogan)

It's not fair. his ASIAN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

(H1ADP77)

Great thing I'm not slaved by my parents while I play the Piano. I'm not even close of what he can do, but this is slavery

(HolyObsedian)

A computer can play other people's pieces too. Creativity is the only thing we have that computers don't and yet he doesn't use it. Shame.

(LoPuFi)

[In reply to LoPuFi, cited above] Concert pianists exist for a reason. If computers could already match live performances then there would be no live performances. Creativity/interpretation can be applied to the performance of a piece. Also, again, he's like 10 years old. Not every good composer has to start at 5.

(Travailleurs)

I remember seeing a guy do this and he was so good that half the time while playing he'd just look up at the audience, smile, and wink.

(AlterEgox5)

Levanon, Yoav

I am learning this piece right now and I am simply awed by the way this 7 year old wonder boy manages to capture not just the technique but the subtle colors and feelings. Proud to be an Israeli

(Yaya70100) (ימסורג ריא)

Simply amazing! Great sensitivity! Bravo!

(Josie Loureiro)

Thank you for watching the video and for being so kind to share your appreciation for Yoav's sensitivity

(Shailevanon) [this appears to be the prodigy's parent speaking]

The next Kissin.

(M8a1x2)

[Text in Hebrew omitted] Yoav is not only a gifted, outstanding pianist with such sensitivity and finesse, but also a delightful child, full of fun, just like a 7 year -old should be! We just saw him interviewed on Israeli TV. Parents—you are doing it right! Wishing you every success for the future

(Leoniela)

Mukumiy, Nuron

You are truly amazing!!

(Pcleo123)

Such children need to be encouraged and praised and given all the support to be nourished. I truly wish the best for this child and know that he will be a force to be reckoned with in the coming years whether he wins a competition or not. He has all the makings of a Barenboim.

(Ijustretired)

I went to summer school this year with Nuron. He's 12 now. His musicality is amazing!

(Mariayl)

Woah! i can't believe we go to the same school!! just the year below nuron o.O kinda feel outta place now...

(Jemima Goodall)

Plz let's children play!!! let's put his parents in jail!!

(Mascagny)

I am sorry for the horrible comments made, well even Mozart had pathetic losers criticizing everything, and where are they now? Go Nuron, well done, you are amazing!, I hope one day I have the honor to see you play

(Gybemm)

Okсениuk, Jonathan

I was so excited when I realized my high school region symphony was doing this piece. I hope I can do it justice (if I make it) as much as Jonathan has!

(Lauren614100)

I LOVE THIS KID!

(ArnelsVideos)

I play 3 instruments with about 20 years of music experience (all my life) and I can say this little one here is for real. Not only it was a cute performance, but also extremely insightful. Well it's no surprise for someone who looks up to Karajan with such a passion:P

(Stellified Sound)

Some people disliked this? Glorious music, and glorious performance!

(Nakedgunmusic)

he is not conducting, he follows the orchestra. but he is fascinating

(Ricky Mark)

Good Job Parents!

(Francy Orjuela)

He is very well in time and he is expressing the dynamics of the music. He is amazing! For a three year old to understand the music well enough to conduct like this is quite incredible. I wish you could see that.

(Pirategirl1998)

Paddler16

I played this when I was 11.. and she can play it at 5 ... amazingggggg

(ClayDeidaraGirl)

Sorry all you haters, but this talented girl is still going strong and ever improving, now I believe 11 years old and no doubt will become a concert pianist. Nothing hard in life is achieved without hard work and she will achieve her goals and no doubt become wealthy and famous for all her efforts. BRAVO @paddler 16

(No1knowledge)

The question is, is she enjoying her music? If she is to continue then there's no way she is going to last without enjoyment in her music. I forced to play the piano by my parents but quit at 10. However I still love my piano, I play Jazz and classic. You need to find what she enjoys if you're looking at a long life span career.

(Hidekona1)

What a shit ... kinder sollen mit Puppen spielen und nicht mit bach! keiner will das hören!! [kids should play with puppets, not with Bach! Nobody wants to hear this]

(Oliver Kluge)

And how do you know she's a forced prodigy? She said herself that her dream is to become a world wide pianist. Why don't you believe her? Just because she's Asian everyone makes such stupid assumptions!

(Penguins4Real)

Paul, Malaki

I want to have his voice OMG. So talented.

(Zach Brooke)

Your an amazing singer and I'm tearing up!!!!

(Madelyn Hesse)

If he keep on this way singing, studding and training he will be a wonderful artist. Just keep on and believe it! Really really beautiful voice. I like it

(MrMarcenal)

Damn ... he made me cry! Amazing. Emotional

(Lylyluvda)

Rockaz0

His drumming skill is no surprise ... He's an Asian.

(Rock12222221)

Cool this asian kid ...

(AMAN UAJNG)

Yes!! Awesome Malaysian boy ...

(Adam Fikry)

Why are all asians so damn talented?!?

(TheBigboobyboy)

[In reply to the previous comment] They start at an early age. like before they can walk. so they work for it not nessarily [*sic*] all talent. they also MAKE the video games I seriously doubt the ever play them. totally disaplined [*sic*] culture, I got to respect the hell out of it.

(Jinny pearce)

ASIATIC POWER!

(Mettimpiace)

Not surprising, asians do everything better

(StreethingX)

Of course he is Asian they always do it better they do one thing all their life

(Almostfamily1)

I love to see how happy he is to be drumming. ♥

(Husqvixen)

I want my future baby to turn out like him:]

(DianaR303)

I'm 18 years old; Yesterday I had played a song on drums, the song was really too basic and when I touched it I felt a God, when I put this video, my excitement of being drummer went to hell, I will dedicate myself to something else, maybe to be a hairdresser I will be the best and nobody will lower morale.: D

(Paolo Vidal)

I wish I had a drum set

(Christopher Belton)

Born talented. (Jerrin Thomas)

Facial expressions on his face are priceless. ...<3

(Corto Maltese)

Thehypnoguy1

They are FORCED to do this most likely. It's North Korea. Their smiles are incredibly fake. That being said however, they have amazing talent yes.

(ImKevin15)

their smiles though ... they're fake. The middle girl especially has a very creepy looking one. It's all very forced looking. I think that's what's so creepy about it.

(Guitar Sennin)

ROBOTS! They are not human!

(TypicalPete)

They are talented but I can't stand the fake smiles.

(Dalusgembalus)

This sounds like a Portuguese song. Could anyone confirm this?

(MasterExploder61)

When they get all percussive at 1:40 that is awesome as hell.

(GogakuNOW)

Trifonov, Daniil

AMAZING!!! 8 years old prodigy not just playing but conveying the message of “separation” [the song title] on his own. Bless you and a tremendous lot of success in the future

(Areg Har)

Trifonov is the best young pianist. His facial expressions are there just because he lives the music. It's not the same as pianists who try to make a show out of their performance. He does not even think of that. In his mind, there is only music, he lives for music, I swear. Please close your eyes and listen to this incredibly musical pianist with his tender and also demonic playing with an unusually great, singing tone. I am not suggesting he is perfect yet but he clearly has an outstanding musicality.

(Hotbebimauz)

Bravo! He is superb, he is wonderful. The question is that many people envy him. That's all! Molodetz to Daniil!

(Szerelem Magyarországot)

What a pity!! When I was his age I was playing hide&seek and other silly games. I wish I have started the piano earlier:(now it's so hard to fulfill my dream of being a concert pianist with only a few years of piano:(:(.

(Snnbdy)

Tsung, Tsung

A Youtuber earlier said this kid was not a prodigy; well according to Wikipedia, “A child prodigy is someone who, at an early age, develops one or more skills at a level far beyond the norm for their age. A prodigy has to be a child, or at least younger than 18 years, who is performing at the level of a highly trained adult in a very demanding field of endeavor”. Mozart started at this age, so Tsung Tsung should be welcomed to the club.

(Littlejamer38)

Level: Asiatic

(Oficinaization)

If you have a child and push him until he pukes you can train him to do anything. When he or she hits puberty he or she will choose their own path in life. Its by design and it happens for you and the spirit that manifested your child. This is but a dream. When you wake you'll understand:)

(Vallen Larsen)

OMG Mozart's son

(oOvinhtamtamOo)

And I thought I was good at playing the piano ...

(Jamie Wu)

I'm shamed.

(MultiplayerFan)

Appendix B Video transcript

Transcript of the conversation between Tsung Tsung and his father, provided by Reddit.com user Leonox in a comment on the tread entitled “I think he said he was four”.

Dad: Play it one more time and you get 5000 points

Kid: Wahhh, right now it's 4000 points?

Dad: Yea

Kid: Wahhh, fiiiive thooooouusand points!!!

Dad: *Wahaha* Boom serious mode, control your excitement, control it. It's very emotional, each time you need to hit the keys hard.

Piano: I sound amazing

Dad: [whispers] Air

Kid: What?

Dad: Air, one more time and it'll be 7000 points

Kid: *Wheeeeeeee*

Piano: Daym

Dad: [whispers] 7000 points

Source: http://www.reddit.com/r/Music/comments/zmogj/i_think_he_said_he_was_four/ (accessed 6 January 2014)

Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

de Mink, F;MCIPHERSON, G

Title:

Musical prodigies within the virtual stage of YouTube

Date:

2016-09-10

Citation:

de Mink, F. & MCIPHERSON, G. (2016). Musical prodigies within the virtual stage of YouTube. McPherson, GE (Ed.). Musical prodigies: Interpretations from psychology, education, musicology and ethnomusicology, Musical prodigies: Interpretations from psychology, education, musicology and ethnomusicology, (1), pp.424-452. Oxford University Press.

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/116049>