

UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

**MUSICAL PRODIGIES: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES ON  
EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMANCE AND CREATIVITY**

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Seine Miene macht Bibi für die Leute, weil er weiß, daß er sie ein wenig unterhalten muß.  
Aber er selbst für sein Zeil hat im stillen sein besonderes Vergnügen bei der Sache, ein  
Vergnügen, das er niemandem beschreiben könnte.

—Thomas Mann, *Das Wunderkind*

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## Introduction

Thomas Mann's novel *Das Wunderkind*, first published in 1903, is widely known for its satirical portrayal of the diverse audience members who are enthralled by the performance of a musical prodigy. The lines selected as the epigraph for this thesis, however, draw attention to the inner world of the prodigy: 'Bibi made his face for the audience because he was aware that he had to entertain them a little. But he had his own private enjoyment in the thing too, an enjoyment which he could never convey to anybody' (Mann 1936, 5). Mann depicts the slightly exaggerated display of bodily gestures as grounded in a conscious act, a deliberate decision of the prodigy. After nearly three years of collecting responses on prodigies, in academic and non-academic, musical and non-musical encounters, I must conclude that this is a highly unusual perspective. Rather than insisting on the exploitative and child-unfriendly pedagogies behind the unusual spectacle, as many do, Mann provokes even further thoughts through the notion of an inexplicable joy. Whereas the capacities for reasoning may still be confirmed on a verbal level, the latter is an experience that remains utterly implicit.

The most common responses to prodigies, as I will argue in this thesis, overlook or explicitly exclude the possibility of rational thought and emotion: "a well-trained monkey," "a robot," or "simply too young to express real emotion" are examples of this kind. This research draws on historical and contemporary sources to investigate matters and meanings of exceptionality and creativity in performances of musical prodigies. The main research question is: *In which ways do written traces of prodigy performances from around 1800 and written and audio-visual traces in 2013 deepen, enrich, and complicate current understandings of exceptional performance, creativity, and the nature of the prodigy phenomenon?* Two further questions signal the critical historical and theoretical trajectories that will be pursued. Firstly, how do prodigy performances in the past and present connect to, continue and diverge from the child Mozart, who is often claimed to be the most exceptional and most famous prodigy of all time? Secondly, what do third-wave feminist and new materialist theories have to offer to prodigy research, particularly concerning the theorization of the unique nature of the prodigy phenomenon?

Prodigy research falls by and large within giftedness studies, a subfield of psychology. As I entered this field with a background in historical musicology, feminist theory and piano performance, it was not a surprise to find great dissonances between the methodological and

epistemological perspectives used and the ones with which I am most familiar. Broadly put, the difference concerns a focus on the social and natural sciences in prodigy research, and an orientation towards the humanities and performing arts on my part. It was surprising, by contrast, to find that the most rudimentary, widely cited theory of prodigies, David Feldman's (1986) theory of "co-incidence," offers an excellent entry point for a debate of new materialist issues. Against the grain of psychological engagement with cognition on the level of individual being, Feldman pays unusual attention to matters of historical context, cultural environment, and individual experience of prodigies. A brief introduction of new materialist debates will explain the relevance of this perspective.

New materialism is a subfield of contemporary feminist and cultural studies in which the basic principles of psychological research—the privilege of the human Subject and individualist and static conceptions of being—are fundamentally questioned. New materialist scholars emphasize the indivisibility (or even, the ontological "entanglement")<sup>1</sup> of traditionally opposed terms: nature and culture, subject and object, mind and body, representation and real. Often, new materialist studies contain both a strong theoretical component—rooted in poststructuralist, anti-representationalist or "monist" philosophies—as well as a focus on concrete phenomena (natural, scientific, technological or cultural). Milla Tiainen (2007; 2012) and Sally Macarthur (2010) were among the first to use this approach in the context of musicology, in their respective studies of opera singing and composition. Their innovative use of fieldwork material, and historical and musicological sources serves as an example for the current study of musical prodigies. New materialism thus offers the primary methodological and epistemological framework of this thesis, while most of the research literature discussed falls under the header of giftedness studies.

In both scholarly and dictionary definitions, the term "prodigy" refers to a young person, sometimes explicitly younger than ten years old. This means that the prefix "child" in "child prodigy" and "musical child prodigy" is effectively superfluous. Although this study follows the strict definition of children younger than ten, I will use the term prodigy without prefix for reasons of consistency. This choice of terminology gains importance in the theoretical inquiry of chapter three, where "childness" and prodigiousness will be distinguished in their own respective assemblages of embodied matters and meanings. In contrast to the fairly consistent boundary of age, the distinction of "music" is easily lost sight of as many studies discuss musical prodigies alongside prodigies in other areas of performance, most notably chess and

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<sup>1</sup> See Barad (2007).



mathematics. Given the limited total amount of research on prodigies, such cross-domain perspectives have been included in this study. This is appropriate since it is not uncommon for prodigies to excel in more than one area.

Nonetheless, the primary aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of prodigy's relation to and impact on one domain in particular; the domain of music. The domain of music offers a wealth of variation and complexity, while providing some directions and structure in terms of the relevant audiences, discourses and cultural field. At the point where the notion of "domain" itself becomes a theoretical question, the specificity and meaning of "musical" in "musical prodigies" will be further discussed. The historical and contemporary sources selected for this research concern actual musical performance in a broad sense, with settings ranging from the traditional concert hall to the private living room. Performance, as understood in this thesis, is more than the faithful reproduction of works and exceeds the opposition between performance and composition that marks traditional views on Western art music. Given the musicological interest in the study of music from the point of view of performance (and performers), as well as the emphasis in contemporary feminist and cultural theory on the *performative* nature of all being (ontologically speaking), musical performance serves as both the concrete focus and theoretical framework to this study.<sup>2</sup>

Two concepts serve to outline the theoretical framework of this thesis: musical prodigies will be approached as both a *phenomenon* and a *figure*. The first term emphasizes actual, situated experience and the event of performance; the second foregrounds the assemblage of meaning and associative content tied together in the term prodigy. This characterization articulates the contrast to standard psychological and historical approaches on a practical and theoretical level. In new materialist debates, however, the distinction between these levels loses clarity, whereas performativity, "onto-epistemology" and feminist theorizations of temporality gain significance.

The notion of phenomenon signals the key importance of Karen Barad's (2007) agential realist account on the entangled nature of matter and meaning to my approach. In her reading of quantum physics, philosophy and feminist theory, Barad posits the phenomenon as *the apparatus in which objects come into being*. A phenomenon cannot be observed or known from an external position (by a human observer) but rather includes a range of "intra-acting

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Cook (2003) and Rink (2002) on the turn to performance in musicology. Studies that take performative ontology as a starting point for feminist studies of music include Tiainen (2007; 2012); Macarthur (2010); and Kielian-Gilbert (2010).

agencies”<sup>3</sup> from which boundaries of distinct entities are drawn (the “agential cut”). With Barad, I recognize the *onto-epistemological* (and even *ethico-onto-epistemological*) link between what *is* and what can be known about being. Agential realism refuses the traditional separability of objects and concepts in domains of matter and language respectively. Objects and concepts (and human observers) are instead approached from the perspective of *material-discursive*<sup>4</sup> entanglements. Produced in intra-action, objects have no independent existence external to the phenomenon in which they are produced. It follows that objectivity can be conceived of as ‘an *intra-actively enacted agential separability, a relation of exteriority within phenomena*’ (Barad 2007, 340; my emphasis).

Figures, also called figurations or structuring metaphors by feminist scholars, have been deployed as tools for thinking in politico-philosophical practice.<sup>5</sup> Offering a cue towards methodology, feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2009) suggests that figurations are ‘materialist cartographic mappings of situated, [...] embedded and embodied, positions.’ A cartography, she adds, is ‘a theoretically based and politically informed reading of the present’ (5). Inquiring into concrete histories, contemporary cases and theoretical accounts of prodigy performance, the three chapters of this thesis thus present a cartography. As the second key term to mark the framework of this thesis, figures are significant because they can be strategically deployed to carve out new trajectories of meaning. These trajectories, oftentimes nonlinear and unfamiliar, may positively affect social change and reduce inequalities, contributing to on-going feminist, and other, political projects. Rather than a projection of possible change in the yet-to-arrive future, this is a practice of ‘resisting the present, or rather, the theft of it’ (Braidotti 2009, 4) at this very moment. Figures importantly

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<sup>3</sup> In a succinct summary of intra-action, Barad (2013) states: ‘In contrast to the usual "interaction," the notion of *intra-action* recognizes that distinct entities, agencies, events do not precede, but rather emerge from/through their intra-action. “Distinct” agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements. Importantly, intra-action constitutes a radical reworking of the traditional notion of causality’ (30n4; emphasis in original). Agencies, furthermore, include human *as well as* nonhuman, physical *as well as* conceptual forces.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Haraway’s (1988) use of “material-semiotic.”

<sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway (1991) famously used the “cyborg” to refigure the relationship between women, human body and technology. Other examples are the “cat’s cradle” (Haraway 1994), the “nomad subject” (Braidotti 1994) and “diffraction” (Barad 2007). A rudimentary summary and further examples are provided by Lykke (2010, 37ff). Paraphrasing Braidotti, Lykke states that ‘a feminist figuration is “a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity” [...], that is, an alternative subjectivity articulated in a figurative form that points to ways out of hegemonic, gender-conservative discourses about gender/sex in its intersections with other sociocultural categories’ (Lykke 2010, 37).

exceed the domain of language and representation. In a post- or anti-representationalist approach, figures constantly leap over from imagination to material, from embodied realities to conceptual theory. Feminist figures are more concrete and material than Kantian Ideas, myths or products of “pure” imagination, while at the same time always excessive of their concrete form.

The structure of this thesis, as the subtitle indicates, is provided by three time frames: past, present and future. The prodigy phenomenon, with its strongly connected figure of Mozart, will be mapped through traces<sup>6</sup> from eighteenth and nineteenth-century reports of public performances, via contemporary stages of performance to a reading of future perspectives. Even though the successive chapters present a teleological narrative, the theoretical framework and main argument effectively displace the notion of time as linear and unidirectional succession of events. Drawing on lived experience, phenomenology as well as the “hard” science of quantum experiments, feminist materialists have argued that past and future are constantly being refigured in the ongoing materialization of the present (e.g. Grosz 2005b; Barad 2011). Realities of historical events, contemporary cultural practices and future prognoses all emerge in the moment of research. This means that they are *all* open to new insights and transformation, as time unfolds. This is a nonlinear and immanent conception of time. Barad (2011) cites post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida to clarify the point:<sup>7</sup>

The concern is not with horizons of modified—past or future—presents, but with a “past” that has never been present, and which never will be, whose future to come will never be a production or a reproduction in the form of presence. (41)

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<sup>6</sup> The term *trace* (both verb and noun) will be used primarily in a descriptive rather than a conceptual manner throughout this thesis. However, Derrida (1976) offers a profound theoretical consideration on the notion that establishes its relevance to new materialist debates (see e.g. Kirby 2011). In his critique on linguistics, Derrida argues that the trace is that through which all difference, or all that *is*, comes into being. He states: ‘Without a retention in the minimal unit of temporal experience, without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear. It is not the question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the content, of the pure movement which produces difference. *The (pure) trace is difference.* [...] The unheard difference between the appearing and the appearance (between the “world” and “lived experience”) is the condition of all other differences, of all other traces, and *it is already a trace.* [...] *The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general.* [...] *The trace is the difference* which opens appearance and signification. Articulating the living upon the non-living in general, origin of all repetition, origin of ideality, the trace is not more ideal than real, not more intelligible than sensible, not more a transparent signification than an opaque energy and no *concept of metaphysics can describe it*’ (63-65; emphasis in original).

<sup>7</sup> While not a primary source and focus, the work of Derrida is a key resource for new materialists in general that resonates on various levels with the methodology and content of this thesis. Most notable are the deployment of the notion of *trace* (see footnote 5, above) and the alignment of audio-visual and written sources (cf. Derrida 1976, 63).

While respecting the link between what we know and what “is” (again, onto-epistemology), Derrida and new materialists posit the past as an ongoing refiguring of the present. In more common language, this perspective compels to take statements of significance and historical accuracy as provisional, because future research and practice may always lead to new ideas about the past and present. These ideas may even alter the conception of the time as a linear succession of past, present and future.

Traces in writing will be treated accordingly as equally in/determinate<sup>8</sup> entities, whether they point at live events (such as Mozart’s first public performance one September 1, 1761 in Salzburg) or elaborate on ideas, concepts, or theories (such as Kivy’s historic-aesthetical reflections on the creative genius image). Physical, material conditions (aspects generally subsumed under “context”), as well as conceptual, symbolic links, will be further taken into account as productive forces in performance.<sup>9</sup> Without overlooking the medium-specific nature of different sources (e.g. written documents, online videos), the starting point is the phenomenon: the event in which the relations between and distinctiveness of individual traces are produced. A preliminary classification of differences in kind would precisely re-inscribe the dominant dualisms that feminist and critical theory aim to challenge (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2010).<sup>10</sup> From a slightly different angle, this comes down to view that even a most direct and “immediate” live experience of a performance (say, a concert or listening event) is mediated; there is no such thing as an unmediated or “pure” delivery.<sup>11</sup>

The primary outcome of this research must be conceived on the level of theory, while relevant additional insights with regard to history, cultural practice and psychology will be formulated along the way. The aim is to gain a better understanding of musical prodigies, to assess their impact and potential for theorizing exceptionality and creativity. A secondary aim is to demonstrate the workings and potentiality of third wave feminist and new materialist approaches to debates on musical performance. The eventual point, made in chapter three,

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<sup>8</sup> Karen Barad’s use of the forward slash, which I borrow here, emphasizes the entanglement of the two terms. It calls attention to the moment before what she calls the “agential cut” produces a distinct boundary.

<sup>9</sup> This resonates with Barad’s (2007, 340) conceptions of the apparatus and the notion of *objects-in-phenomena*.

<sup>10</sup> By differences in kind, I mean both the nature of the medium (film, live performance, etc), historical location, social and economic factors, and technology.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Auslander (1999). To make the point more explicit, performance is always mediated since its reception by each person is met with a unique set of personal meanings, memories and framework of understandings.

that musical prodigies deserve to be taken seriously as *active* subjects of their own performances, speaks to more than feminist research. It addresses precisely some of the structural limitations in (non-feminist) psychological and musicological research. As an often excluded, either ignored or transcendentalized phenomenon, the perspective of prodigies enriches and challenges feminist and musicological debates through their particular material-discursive entanglement with the figure of the child Mozart; a figure of exceptionality and extra-ordinary creativity.

# Chapter 1 Mozart, a Figure of Exceptionality

## 1.1 Definition

In dictionary definitions and every day speech, the term prodigy refers to a person with exceptional qualities or abilities, typically a precociously talented child. Etymologically, prodigy derives from the Latin *prodigium* (wonder, miracle) and first surfaced in fifteenth-century texts in the meaning of an extraordinary thing or occurrence, regarded as an omen (a prophetic sign). Contemporary references still invoke the idea of something other or outside of ordinary human being: a monstrous person, a freak, a wonder, or marvel (OED Third Edition, June 2007). The frequent use of adjectives such as “exceptional,” and “extraordinary,” emphasize this idea of an external location, outside of the ordinary and normative ways of being. Exceptionality may refer to all aspects of prodigious doing and being: potential, ability, performance, achievement or identity. It may be actual and verifiable or potential and yet to be expressed. A great contrast to other categories of non-ordinary being, such as savants and autists (but also women), is that prodigies are understood to present a *positive* exception to the norm. Prodigies are different in a way that enables rather than restricts their performance from a socio-cultural perspective.

In academic research of the past three decades, prodigies have been defined as the phenomenon of children who perform at an exceptionally high level in a specific domain or field compared to average performance at their age.<sup>1</sup> Prodigy scholar David Henry Feldman’s (1986) most cited definition states that a prodigy ‘is a child who, before the age of ten, performs at the level of an adult professional in some cognitively demanding field’ (161). The age requirement turned out useful to challenge the “ten year rule” of deliberate practice, which was and remains a most common explanation of expert performance (Ericsson et al. 1993). The term “growing-up prodigy” has been used to address prodigies older than ten (Goldsmith 2000). The emphasis on cognitive demand, in Feldman’s definition, can be understood in similar connection to giftedness research. Other prodigy definitions vary from ‘a person who achieves great success when relatively young’ and a child ‘with early signs of

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<sup>1</sup> Even though the term prodigy frequently appears in music historical writings, proper definitions or critical discussions of the term are rare. For example, a keyword search in the *Grove Music Online* gives 349 biographical entries mention the term prodigy, but a subject entry discussing the origins and definition of the notion is missing (accessed May 26, 2013).

extraordinary achievement’ (Kopiez 2011, 226), to ‘a musically talented child whose performances far surpass those usually expected of a child of his age’ (Révész and de Courcy 1954, 149). Overall, scholars emphasize that “rule-based” fields offer particularly fertile ground for prodigies. A most straightforward example of such a field is chess, whereby a stable set of rules and conventions dictate the structure of the game. The emergence of prodigies in such fields may however have a more pragmatic reason. Structure enables systematic measurement, and measurement in turn supports the scientific and “objective” identification of prodigies. It follows that prodigious talent is most often recognized in specific domains: music, chess and mathematics are the traditional examples. Visual art, writing and ornithology are other fields in which prodigies have been found.

It is now widely agreed that prodigiousness is distinct from high intelligence (e.g. an IQ score higher than 150). Nonetheless, an above average intelligence has been found to mark the difference between prodigies and savants (Feldman and Morelock 2011b; Cf. Ruthsatz and Detterman 2003). Calendar calculators, for example, have often been called prodigies, but are classified under “prodigious savants” in these studies. ‘The general intelligence aspect of prodigy performance seems to give the child access to the social, cultural and specific traditions of the domain,’ hence enabling participation in and recognition by society (Feldman and Morelock 2011b, 228). Prodigious savants (as well as the less extremely skilled “talented savants”), by contrast, are limited in their social and general intellectual functioning, which inhibits equal participation in society. The last decade has seen increasing interest in the study of prodigiousness alongside and through other phenomena; autism has been taken into account alongside savants. It has been found, for example, that prodigies score high on “autism traits,” including attention to detail and single-domain obsession (Ruthsatz and Urbach 2012). Research from this field further confirms Vandervert’s (2009) findings on prodigies’ exceptional working memory. Working memory, according to Ruthsatz and Urbach, is the neuro-cognitive pattern that underlies prodigies’ “rage to master”<sup>2</sup> (Ruthsatz and Urbach 2012; Vandervert 2009; Buttersworth 2001).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The latter expression is an often-cited phrase from Winner (1996).

<sup>3</sup> The measurement of working memory takes place through standardized tests. Ruthsatz and Urbach (2012) explain: ‘Working memory on the Stanford-Binet 5th edition assesses the individual's ability to store and sort information in both the verbal and nonverbal domains. In the verbal domain, participants are asked to listen to a series of sentences and to repeat the last word of each sentence after the entire series is read. In the non-verbal domain, participants watch as the examiner taps on a number sequence and then the participant is asked to recall in order the numbers that were tapped’ (420).

Another term that requires definition is giftedness. While denoting the wider field to which most prodigy research relates, giftedness differs from prodigiousness through the absence of a specific age range and the emphasis on cognitive, academic forms of intelligence. Musical skills are nonetheless a prominent topic in the debate on general versus multiple intelligences that occupies the field.<sup>4</sup> Giftedness can be defined as a fast, creative and independent development, often combined with traits of perfectionism, high motivation and extreme concentration (Lindmayr-Brandl 2006, 370).<sup>5</sup> Among other forms of giftedness, musical giftedness has been said to stand out specifically through the possibility of recognition at an extremely early age, even before verbal skills start to develop. Musical giftedness may appear, for example, when young children show a strong interest and pleasure for sounds, and an exceptional musical memory. Other qualities associated with musical giftedness include sight-reading skills—‘a particular combination of physio-motorical and apprehensive capacities’—and musical inventiveness—‘starting with improvisation and the invention of songs, up until composition in the actual sense’ (ibid.; my translation).<sup>6</sup> The inclusion of sight-reading in this list of general characteristics reveals that Western art music is a privileged domain as compared to musical practices that do not use notation. In the latter, a prodigy may have a similar ability, but the skill is not recognized as significant for a high level performance.

## 1.2 Historical Sources

What do historical sources tell us about the exceptional abilities of musical prodigies and the nature of prodigious performance? Following historian Gerd-Heinz Stevens’ (1982) first historical overview of musical prodigies, the current study does not aim to reconstruct and distinguish between the “real” and merely proclaimed or even fake prodigy performances.<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> See Gardner (1999).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Winner (1996, 3).

<sup>6</sup> These and all other German sources are my own translations, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>7</sup> Kopiez (2011, 227) correctly point out that Stevens’ account is biased towards prodigies who have grown up to become famous adults, which results in a list that includes the names of practically all canonized male composers of Western art music. However, the alternative focus on concert reviews in the influential, exclusively male-authored *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, although more systematic, does not escape a patriarchal bias either.



a more critical approach, the point is not to reveal past truths but to *map*<sup>8</sup> instead the traces of a discourse in which performing musical child prodigies, both the famous and not so famous, have cultural and economic value. Historical traces may consist of literal references to the term prodigy in writing, but may also appear through overlap with one or more of the returning elements in prodigy definitions. They may be found in scholarly as well as popular discourses, fictional or non-fictional. For example, a report of a public performance of a child musician, even if the term prodigy does not occur and reliability is uncertain, is a relevant trace. This section offers a first look at the relevant sources.

Historical traces of musical prodigies can be found in concert announcements, in reviews by critics and admirers in newspapers and journals, and in private communication and memoirs of musicians and members of the cultural elite.<sup>9</sup> These texts reveal a wide public interest in the phenomenon of prodigies in Europe from the late-eighteenth century onwards, a popularity further reflected by artifacts, such as paintings and literature (e.g. Mann 1914).<sup>10</sup> Based on reports in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* between 1798 and 1848, the years 1821-24 have been identified as a peak in the number of prodigies performing in Europe.<sup>11</sup>

What made the music scene in Europe, *circa* 1800, a fertile ground for the rise of public interest in musical prodigies? German musicologist Reinhard Kopiez (2011) offers two important suggestions that will be taken up for further inquiry. First of all, ideas of “childhood” have only developed over the course of the seventeenth century.<sup>12</sup> Without norms and ideas of “average” childlike behavior, prodigies would not have the same capacity to stand out as exceptional. Secondly, the rise of prodigy performances coincided with developing views on human individualism. In a historical shift of views, group membership, birth status, demographic-economic background and religious belief, all ‘lost determining power to explain individual outstanding achievements’ (226). Beside these two major

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<sup>8</sup> See introduction and Dolphijn and Van der Tuin (2012, e.g. 109) on the new materialist method of mapping as cartographical. Cf. Foucault’s (1985) and Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) related yet distinct methods of, respectively, archaeology and cartography.

<sup>9</sup> See for an annotated catalog and discussion of sources Bodsch et al. (2003).

<sup>10</sup> See Bodsch et al. (2003) for more examples.

<sup>11</sup> Kopiez draws on data provided and discussed by Ingrid Fuchs in Bodsch et al. (2003, 59-78). Other periods that have been identified as “flourishing times” for musical prodigies include the years around 1900 and, in the years 1920-1930 (the latter in particular in the San Francisco bay area). See Goldsmith (2000).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ariès (1962).

developments, Kopiez mentions the specific state of the musical genre, the concert culture, the development of keyboard instruments, and changing views on professional musicianship as possible contributors to the rise of prodigy cultures at this time.

Among the earliest sources that inform us about prodigies is a publication by the French catholic librarian Adrien Baillet dating from 1688. His treatise, known under the title *Des Enfants Célèbres*, describes children who obtained fame through their study or written works before their twentieth year of age. A famous early case, often cited as the first prodigy is the “Lübecker Wunderkind,” whose real name was Christian Heinrich Heineken (1721-1725). During his short but remarkable life he attracted attention through his exceptional intelligence: he could read and speak several languages before his second birthday. This skill led to invitations to perform at the royal courts of Denmark and Norway, among other places. Heineken died at the age of four due to celiac disease (von Schöneich 1726; 1779).

In his ‘Account of a very remarkable young musician,’ physicist Daines Barrington (1771) reports of a much more famous case that is still known among the common public today (cited in Bodsch et al. 2003, 162). His report of the visit of the Mozart family to the royal court in London is among the rare and most cited sources on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s early years. From the perspective of scientific and historical objectivity, this scientist offers the most independent and therefore reliable account of Wolfgang’s exceptional musical abilities, in contrast to the personally inflected travel diaries<sup>13</sup> and memoirs of his sister Maria Anna (also known as Nannerl) Mozart.<sup>14</sup> A report by music historian Charles Burney<sup>15</sup> (1781) dates from the same period, detailing four British boy prodigies. These include the famous William Crotch, who has been said to perform the tune of ‘Let ambition fire thy mind’ at the age of two (Gardiner 1839, 189). Crotch was appointed as organist at Christ’s Church College in Oxford at age 14, and pursued a career as performer, scholar and teacher in later life.

A first medical-psychological perspective came from Viennese doctor and musician Anand Wilhelm Smith (1787). Smith’s account is paradigmatic to the extent that it displays three aspects that return in many writings on prodigies of the past and present. Firstly, it notes and celebrates the name of Mozart. Secondly, it rails against the promise of eminence in

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<sup>13</sup> See Bodsch et al. (2003, 159).

<sup>14</sup> For examples of contrasting sources, see Bodsch et al. (2003, 159).

<sup>15</sup> Charles Burney is known as one of the founders of historical musicology. He published a comprehensive four-volume History of Music in 1776.

adulthood, which most prodigies cannot fulfill. Thirdly, it expresses concern about the health and well-being of prodigies, who are understood to have reached their exceptional level under the unnatural and high pressure of their fame-seeking fathers. With technological advances of the twentieth century, new types of sources have become available. Film, television and online media now provide audiovisual traces of prodigy performances. A first look at contemporary sources will be offered later in this chapter, and further discussion follows in chapter two.

### 1.3 Research on Prodigies

Two publications from the 1980s mark the start of increasing scholarly interest in child prodigies. Feldman's (1986) *Nature's Gambit: Child prodigies and the development of Human potential* is among the most-cited studies in prodigy research. Written in cooperation with Lynn T. Goldsmith, the book reports of a ten-year longitudinal study of six boy prodigies. Music plays an important role in the lives of three of these prodigies, but only one is a musical prodigy in the classical sense; the latter receives intensive violin and composition lessons from an early age and follows the typical trajectory to become a conservatory-trained music professional. Frequently cited findings of Feldman's study include the following: 1) prodigies display 'a mix of child and adult-like qualities'; 2) the sustained efforts of at least one parent, of teachers, and others are necessary to support the development of a prodigy's talent; 3) the process towards exceptional performance requires several years of dedicated training (even in the most extreme cases); and 4) prodigious talent is nonetheless, at least in part, natural and inborn (Feldman and Morelock 2011b, 212). The second landmark publication is Gerd-Heinz Stevens (1982) *Das Wunderkind in der Musikgeschichte*, the first systematic historical overview of musical prodigies. It includes around 900 names of prodigies found in various written sources since 1595. Historical research on prodigies, however, remains scarce to date. Although biographic and anecdotal discussions to historical cases are quite common, very few take account of critical perspectives on historiography.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Historical approaches often approach prodigies through biographies of famous composers or world-class performers (Stevens 1982; Goldsmith 1990; Howe 1990; Radford 1990; Kenneson 1998; Lindmayr-Brandl 2006). This is problematic to the extent that they equate fame with significance; they take the superiority of canonized "geniuses" (Mozart, Mendelssohn, Liszt) for granted. More critical historical perspectives that were identified in the context of this study are limited to five essays collected in Bodsch et al. (2003) and a lexicon-entry by Unsfeld (2010).

The dominance of psychological approaches situates contemporary prodigy research between giftedness studies and music psychology.<sup>17</sup> The studies are consequently directed towards major issues in the social sciences, such as the “nature versus nurture” debate. Studies that follow the nature line of thought present with modern versions of the “wonder of nature” narratives. For example, Ruthsatz and Urbach (2012, 420) suggest that the abnormality of an improved working memory and extreme visual spatial abilities ‘may have occurred about 10,000 years ago’ in the cerebral cortex, a specific region of the brain. Proponents of the nurture point of view, by contrast, often frame their research in near-to stepwise guides for achieving excellence (Howe 1990; Ericsson 1996; Williamon 2004). Most widely shared, however, is the view that exceptional performance, in one way or another, depends on a “fortunate” combination of elements of both nature and nurture. Implying a gliding scale in the nature-nurture relation, Feldman and Morelock (2011b, 212) for example suggest that ‘the more extreme the case, the more nearly completely inborn the talents are likely to be’. Another debate on which prodigy scholars often touch concerns the question of general versus multiple intelligences (Gardner 1999, see introduction). Prodigies, here, are put forward as experts in a single domain, which supports the multiple intelligences hypothesis.

The methods used in prodigy research range from IQ-tests and brain-scans to in-depth interviews and observation. Case studies and qualitative approaches are more numerous than large-scale and longitudinal approaches. Besides case studies, experiments, and analysis, there is occasional attention to theory. In search of the psychological essence of the prodigy phenomenon, these theoretical discussions tend to foreground the genetic, neurological or developmental patterns which are observable at the level of the individual (e.g. Ruthsatz and Urbach 2012). Everything that happens outside the physical and observable boundaries of the individual human being tends to be overlooked or purposefully set aside. Developmental psychologist Larisa Shavinina (2009), for example, presents a thorough and refined theory of prodigiousness that highlights aspects of development and experience. Importantly, she draws attention to the ‘subjective experience of an individual and first of all his or her cognitive experience: the experience of the cognitive interaction of a person with the world around him or her, which is the psychological basis of giftedness or the psychological carrier of its manifestations’ (244). The central role of “sensitive periods” and the non-stable character of

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<sup>17</sup> For more elaborate summaries of the state of prodigy research, see McPherson and Hallam (2012) and Feldman and Morelock (2011a; 2011b).

the specific cognitive experience of child prodigies will gain relevance in the context of the later discussion of individuality and temporality in chapter three of this thesis.

In positioning her work Shavinina claims that socio-cultural approaches (which foreground aspects of family, cultural systems, and the wider socio-historical environment), are occupied with ‘no more than circumstances’ which ultimately do not reveal anything about the ‘nature of prodigious achievement’ (236) This follows from an earlier statement: ‘To understand the inner/fundamental mechanism of the prodigy phenomenon means to understand how this phenomenon develops *within* the child’ (234). In this thesis, by contrast, I understand the nature of prodigies as something that is fundamentally connected to (or to use Barad’s terminology: “entangled” with) all that exceeds isolated and measurable aspects of the individual child. This perspective comes much closer to Feldman’s (1986) theory of co-occurrence, which, against the grain of psychological emphasis on the individual, takes into account the socio-historical specificity of the prodigy phenomenon. In this view, the success and very existence of prodigy, next to its inborn genes and potential to learn, depends on the specific relation between his or her abilities and the rules of the field of expertise (i.e. the norms and aesthetic conceptions about creative and excellence performance), rules which are not universal and static but change over time.<sup>18</sup>

Historical, social and cultural factors are considered crucial to the development and public recognition of the individual, precociously talented child. This view lends support to the approach of prodigies from the point of view of academic discourses and performance environments which may be considered “external” forces in Shavinina’s scheme. Rather than foregrounding culture as opposed to nature, it will be argued that prodigies, in line with a wide range of phenomena discussed in new materialist studies, express the inaccuracy of the very division. They show instead how life is produced in an ongoing reconfiguration of “naturecultures.”<sup>19</sup> Culture, in a sense, is found to lie at the heart of prodigies’ nature. Yet, I will argue that Feldman’s co-occurrence theory is decidedly non-constructivist.

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<sup>18</sup> Ruthsatz and Urbach (2012) classify Feldman’s more recent work with Morelock (2011b) under proponents of the “nature” position for its emphasis on ‘inherent ability’ (419). Given the consistent multi-directional perspective set out in co-occurrence theory and the adjustments made in subsequent later publications, as I will argue, *Nature’s Gambit* ignores the nature-nurture division in favor of a “naturecultural” perspective.

<sup>19</sup> The concept of “naturecultures” was coined by Donna Haraway (2008) and is used throughout new materialist debates as a starting point for rewriting the nature versus culture binary and many other, including phallogocentric, categorizations in thought.

To complement and advance existing theories on the nature of child prodigies, the current investigation thus starts from the idea that historical, social and cultural forces are not merely taking part in the production of the cultural domain and hegemonic views with which prodigies interact, these forces also direct the focus and content of prodigy research. This can be seen most pertinently in the selection of “proper” case studies, “relevant” literature, and uncritical references to the “paradigmatic” examples. In an attempt not to overthrow but to show how this system of privilege works, I will now set out to explore the most-cited point of reference in prodigy discourses: the child Mozart. While taking different entry points in the subsequent chapters, the workings of popularity, privilege and dominant discourses remains a core concern throughout this thesis.

#### **1.4 The Figure of Mozart**

In an attempt to offer historical explanation, Stevens (1982) suggests that the young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) was not just a prodigy but one that initiated the subsequent popularity and “wave” of prodigies in the early nineteenth century. He points at the ongoing association of Mozart with the notion of child prodigy in scholarly and popular writings and, in particular, to concert advertisements in which new prodigies are announced to be a “new Mozart” (Stevens 1982, 101). Leaving aside the difficult question of historical causality, a closer look at the sources will serve to confirm that Stevens has a point. The name of Mozart is strongly tied to the prodigy phenomenon. In fact, a reference to the young Mozart may be the most common response to any performance of an exceptional child musician, not only in the past but still today; not only in daily speech, but also in academic discourses.

The name-dropping often happens in announcements of or reports on a “second” or “new” Mozart. This practice already started during Mozart’s short life. In 1779, when Mozart with twenty-five years had already produced many of his famous masterpieces, Charles Burney refers to Mozart in a report on English prodigy Samuel Wesley (Bodsch et al. 2003, 164). A few years later in 1783, Christian Gottlob Neefe writes the following recommendation for his famous pupil Ludwig van Beethoven in the *Hamburger Magazin der Musik*:

This young genius deserves support so that he can travel. He will certainly become a second Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, if he continues to make progress in the way he started. (cited in Ladenburger 2003, 11)

In an expression of local variation, composing prodigy Pio Cianchetini (1799-1851) is presented as a British Mozart (“Mozart Britannicus”).<sup>20</sup> Another notable case is Mozart’s own son: Franz Xaver was renamed “Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Sohn.” This literal adoption of Mozart’s name is generally interpreted along similar lines of promotional intentions (Cf. Fuchs 2003b, 65).

A report in the *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* from 6 July 1825, at the height of the prodigy wave, notes the excessive and often deflationary use of Mozart’s name:

The amount of prodigies, from which people expected a *second Mozart*, or some other kind of exceptionality since Mozart, has continued to grow and the expectation has so often turned out idle that, as it seems, people have become somewhat more cautious of the phenomenon. They now consider them as objects of curiosity rather than of admiration and honest expectation. (cited in Bosch et al. 2003, 183; my emphasis)

The commentator holds that the references have become an overused and strategically deployed expression. For the current analysis it is important that the references, thus far, present a similar relation between prodigy and Mozart: they imply that the act of merely approaching Mozart’s level is the highest thinkable achievement of a prodigy. Mozart is the ultimate ideal prodigy.

Much less frequent, by contrast, are references whereby a prodigy “wins” the comparison to Mozart; statements in which a prodigy is said to have *exceeded* Mozart’s abilities. The enigmatic German poet and writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe praised the twelve-year-old Felix Mendelssohn by stating that what he ‘already achieves at this moment, compares to Mozart like the accomplished speech of an adult to a child’s babbling’ (according to a report of Mendelssohn’s father, cited in Fuchs 2003a, 36). Goethe was himself only twelve when he witnessed the seven-year-old Mozart perform in Frankfurt in 1763. The encounter with Mendelssohn followed nearly seventy years after. Statements like this one, in which the child Mozart appears to be a more “worldly” than transcendental and idealized figure, are rare but significant. They show that the child Mozart—as part of the Mozart figure in a wider sense—has no fixed meaning, even though it appears to be stable and consistent. The importance of authority to the one who expresses this view, as well as the “proof” of Mendelssohn’s talent in the sense that his name was canonized, is hard to overestimate. Shortly hereafter, I will discuss a contemporary example that, despite a more systematic comparison, has a much harder task at conveying credibility.

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<sup>20</sup> See also Bodsch et al. (2003, 165).

References to the child Mozart continue to appear in scholarly and popular discourses of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Psychologist Géza Révész (1925) uses the name at first to attract attention and frame the skills of Erwin Nyiregyhazi (1903-1987), a prodigy “of Mozart’s kind.” Despite similarities, however, Révész concludes that Mozart ultimately remains the most talented and exceptional after a closer study of their compositions:

Mozart [...] was a much more finished composer than Erwin, both from the point of view of form and, especially, of harmony—a fact that may be ascribed, not only to his far greater *talent* but, partly, to his exceptionally favorable musical *surroundings*, and the advanced musical *education* and *culture* of the period, which had so favorable an influence on the development of the musical talent of his day. In spite of this they have much in common, such as, for instance, the wealth of melody and unity of feeling, which both would seem to have possessed, if one compares the chronologically-corresponding compositions of the two children up to their seventh year of age. (145; my emphasis)

Beside a return to the Mozart figure, this passage is noteworthy for the way it lists aspects of inborn nature side by side with circumstantial factors in order to account for Mozart’s exceptionality. Predating the sharp distinctions of the nature-nurture debate, this view resonates with the co-incidental perspective on prodigies as a naturecultural phenomenon. More perspectives on Mozart’s exceptionality will be discussed later.

Jumping towards a more recent past, in December 2012 keyword searches on video-sharing website YouTube returned 4910 results on “next Mozart” and 22,800 results on “musical prodigy.”<sup>21</sup> Both search result lists are headed by one and the same video: ‘The Next Mozart? 6-Year Old Piano Prodigy Wows All.’<sup>22</sup> The video shows a TV documentary item on the American composing and piano prodigy Emily Bear (b. 2001). It has received 23.7 million views since it was uploaded in 2008 and the statistics show a steady and continuing growth of this number.<sup>23</sup> The discourse on “next Mozart’s” and the prodigy phenomenon, in other words, are still alive after more than two centuries. Another even more recent Mozart-like

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.youtube.com> (accessed December 12, 2012)

<sup>22</sup> See appendix A. Editorial note: Online videos will be referenced in footnotes throughout this thesis, with exception of all videos included in the survey (see chapter two). Source details for these videos are provided in appendix A, table 1.

<sup>23</sup> The workings and relevance of YouTube statistics will be discussed in chapter two.



prodigy is the British Alma Deutscher<sup>24</sup> (b. 2005), who reached the attention of international media channels after having composed an opera at the age of seven. A two-minute ABC News item entitled ‘Musical Prodigy: Mini-Mozart Alma Deutscher Composes Own Opera at Age Seven,’<sup>25</sup> uploaded to YouTube in October 2012, captures surprisingly many aspects of the Mozart-prodigy image and even includes a one-by-one quantitative comparison of age and achievements. The following transcript and screenshots (see fig. 1) give an impression of the video content.

Voice-over: Like so many child prodigies, her playing is perfect. Her sound is surreal. But before seven-year-old Alma Deutscher’s feet reach the floor, she has already written this: An opera, composed for an entire string orchestra, praised by the best opera house in Great Britain.

Alma Deutscher: I had the theme when I was very young. And it is really mysterious.  
[She sings the melody.]

Voice-over: She isn’t just reading music, she is writing it as she goes: all improvisation of the top of her head. How gifted is she? Well, almost already a year ahead of another prodigy you might recognize.

[Mozart picture slides in view. See fig. 1]

Mozart could play and name notes at three; Alma could do that at *two*. Mozart was first writing at five; Alma was *four*. Now over the years we have seen some extraordinary children:

[A short collage of other YouTube videos is shown]

Umi Garret was 8; Brianna Kahane, 7; and pint-size Jonathan Okseniuk, conducting at just 4. All great *performers*, but Alma is great *composer*. And some say she writes with the same quality as Mozart, when he was the same age.

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<sup>24</sup> Except for Nuron Mukumi, who gave his explicit consent to the use of his name in my thesis, I have not been able to get in touch with the twenty-three contemporary prodigies that are discussed in this thesis. As a way to follow their own (or their parents’ or managers’) choices regarding publicity, however, I only use full names which are prominently and publicly available. I use pseudonyms for two cases in which the primary channel (with a biographic collection of videos, likely to be owned by a parent or close relative) does not promote the name.

<sup>25</sup> <http://youtu.be/3usTOsRyGBg> (accessed May 26, 2013)

Brian Zeger [Opera Program Director at Julliard]:

I can't think of anybody quite this young. This is really remarkable.  
She just lives and breathes music.

(0:20-2:07; my transcript)



Fig. 1. Screenshots.

Although allusions to the child Mozart appear in many prodigy videos on YouTube, this particular one stands out for its brevity and for a literal comparison on key points: the age at which musical ability has first been recognized, and the qualitative distinction between “mere performers” and composing/improvising prodigies. These points are put forward as measurable aspects of prodigious exceptionality. Moreover, similar to Goethe’s account of the young Mendelssohn, the video presents a rare example of a comparison in which the prodigy in question *overrules* the young Mozart. However, the video format, especially the professional editing and use of voice over, communicates an image of mass media, which is associated with commercial and entertainment purposes rather than independent and objective reporting. The inclusion of a short statement from an “expert” shows that the makers realize this lack of authority on their own part. The authority and legitimacy of prodigy “experts”, as well as the clash between commercial interest and authenticity remain to be further discussed in the subsequent chapters. For now, the observation suffices that both in terms of (re)presentation and in terms of actual and irrefutable musical abilities, Emily Bear and Alma Deutscher can be considered the most “Mozart-like” prodigies on YouTube today. The construction of exceptionality in the case of Alma receives further attention towards the end of this chapter.

Not only the domains of popular and commercial culture, but also the domains of academic literature, are saturated with references to Mozart as the most exceptional prodigy

of all time. German historian Michael Ladenburger (2003, 11), to name but one example, notes Mozart as ‘the prodigy *par excellence*’ in passing before even naming the young Ludwig van Beethoven, who is the actual subject of his essay. Had Beethoven only been blessed with a similarly engaged family and a more outgoing personality, so Ladenburg argues, he could have become a prodigy of similar reputation as Mozart. Another expression that returns in historical and contemporary, popular and academic references is “the Black Mozart,” for example in reference to Chevalier de Saint-George (1745-1799) and Hieronymus August Bridgetown (1778-1860) (Smith 2004; Bodsch et al. 2003, 182).

Before coming to the question of exceptionality it is worthwhile to first provide a definition of the Mozart figure and its adjective “Mozart-like.” While remaining central to all that follows, it offers a glimpse at the theoretical perspectives that most prominently return in chapter three. As discussed in the introduction, feminist figurations exceed the realm of abstract imagination or myth. Figures constantly leap over from imagination and theory to material, lived realities, which in turn leave a mark on a conceptual-discursive level. The Mozart figure, therefore, can be understood to operate in concrete events or performances, accessible through traces such as written reports and audiovisual recordings in which the name of Mozart turns up. Importantly, it must be recognized that the figure works differently in each assemblage, even when a relatively stable set of features seems to make up its form and content.

A relevant theoretical connection can be drawn between the Mozart figure and the workings of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of “abstract machine.” While operative in concrete assemblages, abstract machines ‘consist of *unformed matters and nonformal functions*’ (511; emphasis in original). Deleuzian feminist and musicologist Sally Macarthur (2010) clarifies the distinction between assemblage and abstract machine as follows: ‘If an assemblage is defined by a territorialising element, the abstract machine—which may be understood as a virtual possibility—is its deterritorialisation’ (60).<sup>26</sup> The abstract machine is particularly relevant because of the specific name and historical moment attached to the Mozart figure. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) state:

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<sup>26</sup> Macarthur (2010) focuses on the composer-work relation and the way in which various machines (the celebrity-machine, the genius-machine, audience-machines, marketing-machines) interact with the composer-machine. Her method of assembling and de-assembling these various workings aims at transforming and liberating the composer-machine ‘from the parts that have been traditionally locked into segmented, molar lines in the neo-romantic model of authorship’ (60).

Abstract singular, and creative, here and now real yet nonconcrete, actual yet noneffectuated—that is why abstract machines are dated and named (the Einstein abstract machine, the Webern abstract machine, but also the Galileo, the Bach, or the Beethoven, etc.). Not that they refer to people or to effectuating moments; on the contrary, it is the names and dates that refer to the singularities of the machines and to what they effectuate. (511)

The abstract machine of Mozart thus works through in varying configurations of biographical, historical, symbolic, musical, musicological or socio-cultural resonances to the name or any other aspect of the Mozart assemblage. Distinction between myth and fact is of little relevance because they enter experience beyond the level of rational and conscious thought.

The Mozart figure, as an abstract machine, unmistakably enters prodigy assemblages in literal comparisons of specific traits enlarged by visual and sonic mirroring, as in the case of Alma Deutscher. Less explicitly, it works through in passing references to the “exemplar” prodigy in other cases. Importantly, the figure cannot be defined in terms of a stable set of traits. Although Mozart most widely represents an unreachable threshold of exceptionality, some cases have shown to challenge this boundary. In a sense, all prodigies are “Mozart-like” to the extent that they share with Mozart the feat of being a child musician, and performing at a level that is found to be exceptional. It will nonetheless be useful to look more closely at the specific ways the Mozart figure resonates and differs in various events.

### **1.5 Was the Young Mozart Really Exceptional?**

A joint assessment of the Mozart figure and the earlier-discussed definition of prodigiousness results in the following paradox: all prodigies are exceptional, but some are more exceptional than others. The question of Mozart’s exceptionality, therefore, can be understood in (at least) two ways. First, it can be asked how the young Mozart was exceptional in relation to other, non-prodigious children. This requires an examination of the abilities or qualities that justify the label of prodigy. Secondly, it can be asked how Mozart was exceptional *even among prodigies*. Scholars who set out to address Mozart’s exceptionality often arrive at the second point, sooner or later. A closer look at two essays shows how this happens.

Giftedness scholars Gardner and Feldman, whose work has only briefly been touched upon thus far, set out to address the “unique case” of Mozart in two consecutive essays

published in *On Mozart* (Morris 1994).<sup>27</sup> Gardner starts his inquiry into the suggestive question ‘How extraordinary was Mozart?’ with the following diagnosis:

While there were prodigies before Mozart and there have been many since, it is not an exaggeration to maintain that Mozart defined the phenomenon of prodigiousness for the modern era. Mozart is the standard against which all prodigies are assessed, and this standard-setting goes beyond prodigies of performing and composing to prodigies in other domains. (49)

Interestingly, the *discursive* impact of the Mozart figure now emerges as a matter (and measure) of exceptionality. Gardner observes this impact in widespread and common understandings of the ‘modern era.’ It could be argued that critics, experts and even systematic research have a share in this process, because they produce the most explicit assessment of prodigies. However, Gardner does not reach this point but rather moves on to discuss the “truly creative individual” Mozart became in later life.<sup>28</sup>

Feldman, on his part, stays closer to Mozart’s life at prodigy age and opens with a list of qualities according to which Mozart ‘conforms well to the child prodigy profile’ (56). The prodigy profile builds on the idea of co-incidence and includes conditions as well as circumstances that are said to contribute to the optimal development and success of child prodigies: the benefits of a rich educational environment, the opportunity to travel and the full-time commitment of at least one parent to the development of the prodigy. Other factors include a history of family interest in the domain of excellence, the privilege of ‘being the first-born or only son,’<sup>29</sup> and ‘the ability to focus energy and maintain a near-total commitment to reach the highest level’ (ibid.). Turning to distinguish the unique case of Mozart from this general profile, the second part of Feldman’s essay focuses on aspects of

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<sup>27</sup> The essay collection, according to the cover blurb, is dedicated to the ‘realistic and human genius [...], the more complex human individual [rather] than the divinely inspired Mozart of myth, who took his notes directly from God’ (Morris 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Gardner’s full argument identifies four areas where the case of Wolfgang Mozart ‘may be unique,’ which include 1) an evenness of productivity, quality, growth (no crises, breaks); 2) a combination of childlike and adultlike characteristics (Cf. Feldman 1986, 3) exquisite personal intelligences (as his opera characters testify); and 4) a pivotal position on the edge of modernity’ (Gardner 1994, 44-48). On the last point he elaborates: ‘[Mozart] served as an important transitional figure in laying a foundation of independence and self-initiated creation, a foundation that made possible the studiously Romantic lives of the Beethovens, the Wagners, and the Liszts who followed him in the next century’ (48). Including individual as well as contextual aspects, the areas reveal that Gardner, like Feldman, locates the root of exceptionality beyond the level of the solitary individual.

<sup>29</sup> Whether or not prodigies of the past were always boys remains to be discussed at a later point in this thesis.

Mozart's personal character that fall under the "transformational imperative."<sup>30</sup> Two aspects stand out in particular: Mozart had the 'extreme tendency to transform words and meanings in writing,' which find parallels in his musical inventions. He further stood out through a kind of "extreme sociability," that is, 'Mozart's social life was filled with people to a degree not seen in any other prodigy case' (64).<sup>31</sup>

Both Gardner and Feldman base their arguments on a widely shared—though not irrefutable—view among music critics and historians: Mozart is exceptional for having offered a "most significant" creative contribution to the domain of music. Most significant, to cite Gardner, are 'those innovations [which] succeed in changing the definition of the domain and in altering the tastes of the field' (Gardner 1994, 40). Mozart's exceptionality results from accomplishments during his later life, and even from developments in the domain of music that have been ascribed to him well after his life.

This definition of exceptionality depends in part on a judgment in the future, a future in which the cultural domain has changed "significantly" and in which this change is attributed to a single human being. It must be concluded that this is a very specific future while other developments may be possible. Ways of attributing change may alter. The judgment about Mozart's exceptionality is thus not definitive or irreversible. Different views on exceptionality may not just arise in an undefined future; they can also be retrieved by reconsidering the past. I will follow up on this point by taking a closer look at Mozart's historical environment. Mozart will then turn out to have been a prodigy "like all others" in many ways. Furthermore, a kind of exceptionality emerges that is, in a paradoxical manner, not truly unique.

Contrary to what is often implied, Mozart was neither the first nor the only child who traveled all over Europe and performed for highly regarded audiences. Mozart's closest and most famous contemporaries include his own sister Maria Anna ("Nannerl") Mozart (1751 - 1829), the British Samuel Wesley (1766-1837), William Crotch (1775-1847), Garret Wesley

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<sup>30</sup> The "transformational imperative" marks the 'most extreme manifestations of giftedness' at the individual level of cognition and is part of the larger framework for the study of creativity that will be discussed in chapter two (Feldman 1994b, 53; Feldman et al. 1994).

<sup>31</sup> Although active in an enormous social network, there are several reports of Mozart being a "helpless foreigner" in the world of human relations. In an attempt to explain Mozart's 'lack of understanding, his naiveté, and his blindness to the inappropriate' (Feldman 1994b, 67), Feldman suggests that not the relations per se, but the desire to write operas (for which some experience with the social world would be necessary) motivated his social life. He states: 'It was as if Mozart looked out at the world through eyes that perceived only the simplified and somewhat contrived emotions of opera, and behaved as if opera conveys how the social world actually functions' (68).

(1735-1781), the German Marianne von Martinez (1744-1812) and the French Franz Lamotte (1751-1780). In the years between 1798 and 1848, at least 213 prodigy concerts took place as evidenced by reports in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. The actual number, as Kopiez (2011, 232) rightly suggests, is likely to have been higher. Mozart's early life, characterized by the full time dedication of one parent to the development of his expertise, as well as his travels, fits well with Feldman's prodigy profile. A return to LindMayr-Brandl's (2006) definition of musical giftedness reveals how Mozart was like other prodigies in further ways.

LindMayr-Brandl (2006) notes early interest and strong pleasure for sounds, strong musical memory, sight-reading, inventiveness and emotional sensitivity. In contrast to Feldman, who started by pointing out to which extent Mozart fits the profile, Lindmayr-Brandl takes no effort to confirm Mozart's prodigiousness at first instance. Interestingly, however, the traits that define musical giftedness correspond almost one-on-one with some biographical details known about Mozart's early musical development. The memoirs of his sister Nannerl (dating from 1792, a year after her brother's passing) inform us that the young Wolfgang first showed interest for the piano at the age of three, when their father, Leopold, began teaching Nannerl herself. She writes, 'he often spent much time at the clavier [...] and his pleasure showed that it sounded good' (cited in Deutsch 1965, 455). As soon as Mozart received his first lessons from his father at age four, he displayed an ability to accurately and swiftly learn: 'he learned a piece in an hour and a minuet in half an hour, so that he could play it faultlessly and with the greatest delicacy, and keeping exactly in time' (ibid.). Mozart's extra-ordinary sight-reading skills are confirmed by reports of Johann Andreas Schachtner, a friend of the Mozart family.<sup>32</sup>

Eventually, Lindmayr-Brandl does address Mozart's prodigiousness. Drawing on contemporary giftedness research that foregrounds the aspect of independent learning in precocious children, she replaces the emphasis given to the role of Leopold Mozart as a teacher by Feldman and many others. Instead, she finds support for the claim that Mozart was "his own teacher" as much as he may have been under the guiding hand of his father in a re-examination of biographical accounts and an analysis of revised compositions. Does this insight address the way Mozart was different from other prodigies? On the contrary, Lindmayr-Brandl confirms that Mozart was and remains a prodigy even when insights on prodigiousness are changing.

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<sup>32</sup> An elaborate citation of Schachtner's report is provided by Lindmayr-Brandl (2006, 373).

The notion of exceptionality has been approached up until this point as a comparative notion: a singular case that is different from a categorical “other,” which may refer to either the average or normal child, or the average or normal prodigy. Who are these average prodigies and what constitutes their averageness? The travels may be understood as one aspect that constitutes their averageness. Feldman (1994b), for example, remarks that ‘these tours, designed to promote the children as musical “wonders of God”, were often the fate of prodigies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe’ (54). In Mozart’s case, the travels provided a rich educational environment that may have been crucial with regard to his later success.

As is true for all prodigies, Mozart’s successful development depended upon the marshaling and deployment of specialized resources over several years, a feat that was accomplished en passant as the boy and his family made their way from city to city, from religious and noble court to court, and from musical experience to musical experience. (55)

Stevens (1982) is much less optimistic. The travels, to him, are an early example of the exploitation and pressure that came to mark the prodigy phenomenon in later times. The involuntary and oppressive nature of the travels speaks through the fact that Mozart ‘performed notwithstanding illnesses in many European cities’ (101). The dissimilar readings of travels by Feldman and Stevens are not mutually exclusive and may both ring true. The travels may have positively affected Mozart’s exceptional performance and achievements in later life, while simultaneously challenging and affecting his health condition in a negative manner. Thus, even on the level of individual being, one type of movement may have multiple and contingent effects.

The question at issue here, addressed by neither Feldman nor Stevens, is why and how travels became a feat of “average prodigiousness.” It is tempting to maintain that Mozart initiated the trend and set a standard for subsequent generations; if not the isolated man on his own, then certainly the figure—the powerful abstract machine tied to his name. But historical narratives of causality and significance gain credibility precisely through repetition. It is therefore crucial to ask what other forces could be found for the phenomenon of traveling prodigies? Music historian Celia Applegate (1998) offers a perspective on the wider cultural-historical and economic developments of “serious music” in the early nineteenth century. The growing popularity of traveling musicians, including musical prodigies, coincided with changing economic impulses. Public concerts came to replace the previously dominant court and church music cultures, impelling the status of professional musicians to change. The ‘new



man of music,' as Applegate argues, was a traveling virtuoso; a free, creative individual that fitted the class of "movers and doers," inhabited by artists and intellectuals (284). Professional musicians depended on private and public support of music to make a living. Consequently, even 'music-loving philosophers' played an important role as they 'struggled for and won in this period a place for music in modern philosophical and aesthetic debate' (286).

Now consider again the idea that Mozart's fame initiated the wave of prodigies in the early nineteenth century, based on the fact the he was the first, or at least the first "significant" prodigy. A similar causal relation could be drafted between a whole set of ideas on excellence, creativity and aesthetic values which, in synch with the prodigy wave, showed a significant development during and after Mozart's life. Music philosopher Peter Kivy (1967) has explored this line of thought in his essay entitled 'Child Mozart as an aesthetic symbol,' Kivy traces various references to the child Mozart in aesthetical and philosophical writings on music. Goethe and Hegel introduced the child Mozart into aesthetical thought as the ultimate example of a musical genius (256). The image of the child then takes on a life on its own, cut loose from the name of Mozart. This can be seen in the work of Schopenhauer, for whom a certain childlike naivety becomes a prerequisite for artistic geniality. Schopenhauer proclaims that 'every child is to a certain extent a genius, and every genius to a certain extent a child' (Schopenhauer, cited in Kivy 1967, 256).

Kivy explores Mozart's impact on a discursive level. He thereby follows the direction pointed at by Gardner in his earlier-cited comment on how Mozart affected the standards of prodigiousness. Kivy importantly affirms the very fact of 'becoming a symbol of genius' as a trait of exceptionality. In some sense, however, this evokes the problem of circularity: Is Mozart exceptional for having become a symbol, or has he become a symbol for being exceptional? One way ahead, as I have suggested earlier, is to consider that the research publications themselves are part of the discourse that sustains the image of Mozart's exceptionality. Kivy's essay feeds back into the loop of self-sustaining reinforcement of the Mozart figure. It confirms the significance and relevance of an already eminent name.

Giftedness scholars Linda Silverman and Nancy Miller (2009) offer a feminist critique on the tradition in giftedness scholarship that builds on the idea of eminence. They identify this tendency as a "masculine" tradition. It is a tradition in which achievements, status, and prominence are understood as a proof of excellence, typically privileging white male individuals. An alternative, "feminine" perspective on giftedness foregrounds instead exceptional *abilities* rather than exceptional achievements. It starts from the notion that giftedness may not always show itself, for various reasons. The problem with orientations

towards achievements, as Silverman and Miller argue, is that it depends on cultural, social, and gendered norms about the value of specific kinds of achievements. Someone who excels in a domain where the *individual* creative act is much less explicit, in other words, will have a much more difficult task to gain recognition.

Focusing on intellectual giftedness, this analysis does not seamlessly attach to the realm of musical giftedness and prodigies. Nonetheless, the gendered distinction between ability and achievement will become relevant at various points during the further discussion. From a performative ontological perspective, nevertheless, the distinction is problematic in the sense that the measurement of ability (e.g. through scoring high on IQ tests) always remains an achievement of some kind. Whereas Feldman and others commonly use the term ability when they refer to the potential to achieve (and often, the potential to become an eminent individual), Silverman and Miller emphasize that abilities have nothing to do with potential, bearing *no* necessary relation to achievements. They are qualities in themselves. An important benefit of the feminine perspective is that it is more inclusive of minority groups. The often criticized standardized tests of intelligence (e.g. the Stanford-IQ tests) have served an important purpose in this regard, by showing that giftedness is equally distributed across divisions of race, class, and gender (117). If the feminine perspective is taken seriously, “significant” achievement and eminence should no longer be the persistent focus of talent development and giftedness research. ‘We can still make a difference in the world, even if no one remembers our names’ (Silverman and Miller 2009, 124). In an attempt to answer to this call, the second chapter addresses multiple, rather than one single prodigy, and focuses on performances in which the exceptional and creative achievement is less evident at first sight.

Gardner’s initial diagnosis may have been correct. The name of Mozart has become a way of conveying the idea that a prodigy is a “truly exceptional” individual, a genius-to-be. It serves to evoke attention and curiosity, and it is a point of reference in our collective memory. With a few exceptions of more detailed discussions of biographical details, the common function of the Mozart figure is plain and simple: it represents superior exceptionalism. The problem with this view is that it universalizes the “masculine” perspective. Not only does it presuppose the significance and value of achievement, it also imposes individualist creativity as the ultimate way to excel.

Although taking co-incidental “circumstances” into account, Feldman and Gardner attribute the eventual achievement of exceptionalism to the single individual. They thereby overlook a potential strength in Feldman’s own theory of co-incidence, which will be taken as a basis for theoretical discussion in chapter three: the co-incidence framework does not equate

“prodigy” with “individual human being.” The actualization of prodigious exceptionalism is precisely *not* an achievement of individual being. Even the “humanness” of individual prodigies is far from evident. Prodigious exceptionalism takes place in specific relations of time, place, nature and culture. Thus, we may better look for answers to the question of exceptionalism beyond the level of individual being.

In a more recent article on ‘Extreme talent,’ Feldman (2000) comes back to the case of Mozart and takes precisely this turn. His focus is now not so much on the uniqueness of Mozart the individual, but the ‘co-incidence’ of timing, circumstance and chance’ under which his compositional life unfolded (252). He argues that the odds were against him, starting from very basic levels of mere survival (‘less than half of all children during that century survived beyond age 5’); moving on to the level of family history (‘It is rare for a family having little history in music to produce a great musician’); and finally addressing several aspects related to a uniqueness of social and historical timing (255-256). For Mozart’s father Leopold, in rapidly changing socio-economic times, ‘opportunities for achieving a better station through nobility and high church auspices [...] still [seemed] sufficiently promising to put his own career aside’ (257). With the French Revolution only a few decades away, ‘the kind of effort made to place Mozart among the nobility was rapidly becoming an anachronistic, futile enterprise’ (ibid.). Next to the wider social and professional environment, Feldman ponders change and suitability inside the domain of music:

Fifty years earlier the infrastructure of music was insufficiently evolved to support child prodigy performance and composers, and 50 years later Ludwig van Beethoven had begun to move beyond the forms that proved so appropriate for Mozart’s astonishing variations and transformations. (ibid.)

It is a significant step ahead for prodigy research (and mainstream psychology) to recognize the impact and changing nature of forces beyond the level of individual being. Yet, Feldman, Gardner and Kivy draw heavily on terms such as musical excellence, the creative individual, and genius.<sup>33</sup> These terms belong to the aesthetic discourse and mindset known as “modern thought,” which has been criticized from feminist and other perspectives for several decades. In short, the problem is that discourses on excellence and genius sustain the

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<sup>33</sup> Shavinina (2009) forms a positive exception in this regard. She emphasizes instead the unique cognitive experience that separates prodigious development from non-prodigious development. As pointed out earlier, however, she ignores the role of “external” forces beyond the isolated individual minds.

privileged image of white, male, “lone” genius (e.g. Macarthur 2010). This topic will be discussed at greater length in chapter three.

To finish the current inquiry, what are the consequences of recognizing the specificity and limitations of this discourse? Taking the main point of Kivy despite his use of this masculinist<sup>34</sup> language, the Mozart figure must be recognized as an important force in the development of this discourse, on levels both explicit and implicit. It leads to the recognition of a circular argument in Gardner’s claim that the mix of childlike and adultlike qualities mark Mozart’s exceptionality. He effectively compares Mozart to an aspect of genius that was drafted after his own image. In this light, Macarthur hits a weak point in Mozart scholarship, and in all research that address the quality of works of already-famous individuals. The feminist and “feminine” approaches point instead towards productive zones beyond eminence and cultural significance, beyond the masculine privilege of individual achievement. It leads to the question of Mozart’s musical *abilities*.

With overwhelming evidence in written sources and music manuscripts, it is hard to cast doubt on Mozart’s ability to compose and improvise. On a more general level, the skills set a standard of prodigious exceptionality. They are widely invoked to distinguish exceptional from average prodigies. But why are precisely these skills so significant in terms of exceptionality, in common opinion as well as in prodigy research? The possibility of further circularity must be seriously considered. Even on the level of these concrete abilities, it is inevitable that, at least in part, we are measuring Mozart’s exceptionality against his own standard.

Another problem is that composition and improvisation stand out at the cost of other abilities, deemed less significant, or even irrelevant. In the domain of Western art music, the subordinate category typically includes the faithful, unaltered or “reproductive” performance of existing composition, notated musical works. An approach oriented towards abilities, furthermore and finally, always depends on limitations of perception. Abilities can only be known to the extent that they manifest themselves in a performance of some kind. Their ontological status has a degree of indeterminacy. It means that the “masculine” realm of achievements cannot be completely bypassed by turning towards abilities, even if significance is seriously questioned. This limitation marks a study of ability in the past as much as the encounter with abilities in the present, as I will argue next.

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<sup>34</sup> A link to Macarthur’s (2010) use of this term is intended here.

The new materialist and performative approach, as stated earlier, acknowledges that there is no direct or *immediate* access to any state of actuality without the participation of an observing, experiencing, and embodied subject.<sup>35</sup> There is, in fact, no outside of embodied experience, not even when we engage in a most theoretical reflection on abstract figures from a distant past. How does the observation, or more accurately put, the *experience* of exceptional abilities take place? Is it at all possible to specify a stable set of criteria according to which ability may be called exceptional, or is the assemblage that defines exceptionality infinitely varied? We have seen how the simple affirmation of existing criteria may result in reinforcement of the Mozart figure, and of “masculine” privilege. A feminist approach that is more supportive of underprivileged categories in theory, culture and society, could start by de-emphasizing the Mozart-related terms, opening up to not (yet) recognized domains of expertise, and realizing that fame, career, and cultural significance are highly specific products of co-incidence. They are neither the accomplishment of a single individual, nor a universal signifier of exceptionality.

### **1.6 Prodigies Today: The Construction of Exceptionality in the Case of Alma Deutscher**

Whether or not one chooses to follow the feminist and “feminine” approach, the changing perspectives on giftedness and exceptionality call for a closer consideration of prodigies in the present. In what way are prodigies today affected by the Mozart-image? If true exceptionality depends on a future judgment of a transformative creative contribution to culture, as the Mozart figure implies, then our ability to identify, perceive and experience exceptional abilities of prodigies in the *present* is severely impaired. Truly Mozart-like exceptionality, as I will argue, may ultimately lie in the way a prodigy will have affected the very yardsticks of exceptionality. This perspective starts from the situated and embodied experience of prodigy performance (in which divisions of prodigy/listener, self/other and individual/social are unfixed) rather than the disembodied and static location of much scholarly and journalistic reasoning. I will return to Alma Deutscher (whose video has been transcribed and cited above) in the remaining pages of this chapter in order to illustrate how even a most Mozart-like prodigy in the present remains limited in the capacity to express exceptional ability.

The ABC News item on Alma Deutscher communicates exceptionality in a number of ways. First of all, the age at which musical skills (reading notes, composing a piece) first appeared is taken as a measure of exceptionality. Secondly, a line is drawn between the skills

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<sup>35</sup> See introduction.

of improvisation/composition and the skills of “mere” performers through a short collage of other prodigy videos.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, one famous YouTube prodigy is not included in the selection of videos: the composing and improvising Emily Bear. The reason for this appears simple. Emily Bear shares so many features with Alma and Mozart that her inclusion would have troubled the otherwise consistent communication of an image of exceptionalism. Thirdly, the authority of an expert is invoked, when program director at Julliard, Brian Zeger, confirms that this is a truly unusual case.

Some additional online research<sup>37</sup> reveals that Alma’s case resonates on more levels with issues discussed in this chapter. In the light of the notion of performance ‘at an adult professional level’ that has marked some scholarly prodigy definitions (discussed at the start of the chapter), it is significant to find out that Alma’s composing talent gained attention when she took part in a competition for *adult* composers. She submitted a seven-minute soundtrack for the opera *The Sweeper of Dreams* to this competition, which held no separate criteria for child participants.<sup>38</sup> Alma’s work was thus assessed under adult standards. Although she reached media attention and received an incentive prize, Alma’s work was not selected for the final round of the competition.<sup>39</sup> Other important aspects resonating with the prodigy figure are specialized education and family support.<sup>40</sup>

In Alma’s encounter with the Mozart figure, one aspect remains to be discussed. How does being a girl affect the image of exceptionalism? It appears to be a general agreement among prodigy scholars that girls have significantly better opportunities to be recognized as

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<sup>36</sup> In regard to the second chapter of this thesis, it is significant that the video recognizes the context of the online environment in it operates.

<sup>37</sup> Other videos from Alma Deutscher’s personal video channel, Google search, websites of media and music institutions have been consulted for this purpose.

<sup>38</sup> The name of the competition, “Mini-Opera,” refers to the length of the composition, not to the age of its participants. The competition is an initiative of the English National Opera to reach out for new talent among writers, composers and filmmakers. <http://www.minioperas.org> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2221167/Meet-Little-Miss-Mozart-The-miniature-musician-aged-seven-composed-opera.html> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>40</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-20036511> (accessed May 26, 2013) The BBC News documentary item ‘Alma Deutscher, seven, writes opera *The Sweeper of Dreams*’ (dated October 22, 2012) reveals the dedication of the father offering help with notating compositions and mother accompanying Alma’s violin playing on the piano. This exemplifies the kind of parental commitment that has been called necessary for the optimal development of prodigies (e.g. Feldman and Morelock 2011b, 212). Another aspect includes the family’s willingness to move house in order to live closer to the specialized music school. Cf. Feldman (2000, 262).

prodigies since the “second wave” of feminism, and that prodigies in the past, conversely, were typically boys (Feldman and Morelock 2011, 262; Goldsmith 1990; Cf. Stevens 1982). If this is true, then simply being a girl would have been seen as exceptional, at least in the past. Melanie Unsfeld (2010) draws precisely this conclusion in the German *Lexikon Musik und Gender*'s entry on prodigies: ‘on the one hand it precisely heightened the divergence of the visual impression, namely of a soft, still very young girl, and her virtuosic and mental capacities’ (528). The same line of reasoning returns in attempts to explain the curious fact that some boy prodigies are known to have performed in girl clothes. Addressing the case of Benjamin Hallet (1743-1765), historian Otto Biba suggests that audiences were perhaps even more impressed when not a boy, ‘but a little girl played the cello so well’ (in Bodsch et al. 2003, 172-173).

However, sheer numbers contradict this view. The concert reviews, discussed earlier, report of 70 girls and 131 boys prodigy concerts in the period between 1798 and 1848 (Kopiez 2011, 230). Girl prodigies, thus, were not at all uncommon; perhaps not a majority, but neither a truly rare phenomenon. Within the most popular sub-category of prodigy *pianists*, girls were even better represented (299).<sup>41</sup> These numbers suggest that being a girl was not at all exceptional among piano prodigies. With regard to composition, though, being a girl takes on a different meaning. Kopiez’ data include only two reports of prodigy composers, both boys (Cf. Stevens 1982). However, the relevance of this category in a study of prodigy *concerts* may be questioned. These composers most certainly were skilled instrumentalists as well, performing their own works. If composition is singled out, why not improvisation? In the early days of the divide between performance and composition, improvisation and free variation were not yet banned from the domain of performance. In other words, it is very likely that the girl prodigy pianists were skilled improvisers. The exceptionality of girl prodigies remains a question, even if we focus exclusively on the past and even if we assume, for now, the significance of creative skills. The perspective of the present, including dynamic and wider interpretations of creativity, will further complicate the issue. I return to this point near the end of chapter two.

At this point, it is worth considering that the specialized Yehudi Menuhin School plays an important role in the support and development of Alma’s improvisation and composition

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<sup>41</sup> With 52 boys and 46 girls, Kopiez (2011) concludes that ‘the piano was performed in equal measure by boys and girls’ (229). He adds, however, that ‘66,7% of girl prodigies were pianists compared to 39,7% of the boys.’. Girl prodigies were mainly found to be pianists and singers, whereas boy prodigies most often performed as pianists, violinists or flutists (230).

skills.<sup>42</sup> In contrast to more common conservatory programs, this school offers lessons in improvisation and composition from a very early age. David Dolan, one of the teaching staff, is a well-known specialist in classical and baroque style improvisation. It is highly unusual to find improvisation, not to mention composition, on the weekly schedule of very young music students. It is quite well possible and likely that Alma's creative practice manifested itself before she entered this school. But the specific style and development of her practice is certainly shaped by this curriculum.<sup>43</sup>

In a sense, this very curriculum, while increasing the very likelihood of being recognized as a composing prodigy in the first place, limits the possibility of exceptionality. Unlike Mozart, Alma does not live at what Gardner called the "edge of Modernity." The baroque and classical improvisation styles are understood to be traditions of the past. Even though the variation techniques can be used on modern tunes, as Alma demonstrates in other videos,<sup>44</sup> the style is generally not considered to be open to change and transformation. In other words, Alma's performance constitutes an anachronism. It suggests a gap between past and present. The question is whether this gap is real and universal in an ontological sense, or a matter of perception and experience, affected by specific frames of time and thought.

It can be safely assumed that a linear and often teleological conception of time dominates current understandings of music performance, at least those of professional practitioners and "experts" including teachers and music critics. As a consequence, it is practically unthinkable that a performance in the present within a domain "of the past" would be received as a transformative and culturally creative contribution that significantly changes the very domain. An example of a domain "of the past" is Alma's improvisation in the classical style, a conserved tradition. The dominant conception of time allows present performances to deepen understandings of how it "must have been" in these domains, but it does not allow any change to how it "actually was." The past that "actually was" has a fixed essence even when it remains forever unknown, partly known or poorly understood in the present. The notion of a

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<sup>42</sup>In the light of the previously discussed "feminine" turn towards abilities, it is worth noting that the school's audition procedure states that selection is based on "signs of potential" rather than proof of excellence, which include a series of lessons to assess not the actual level of performance, but most of all the ability to learn. <http://www.yehudimenuhinschool.co.uk/school/admissions/> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>43</sup> Other YouTube videos on her channel reveal that after having mastered that baroque and classical style, she is now moving towards romantic musical languages. <http://www.youtube.com/user/AlmaDeutscher> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>44</sup> See 'Nokia ringtone joke - Alma Deutscher (7), October 2012,' in which Alma improvises on the Nokia-tune. <http://youtu.be/Jvr3C-zbHjU> (accessed May 26, 2013)



single, pure and unchangeable past produces the greatest boundary of exceptionality in the case of Alma. In the subsequent chapters, I suggest different ways to approach the temporal and discursive boundaries of prodigies and their domains.

The image of the composer as a progressively trained, autonomous, creative individual remains part of widespread common opinion and expert discourse, even though it has been criticized on various grounds. Macarthur (2010) argues that contemporary curricula for training composers are a primary force in sustaining the legitimacy of this view. The cultural domain of “new” music is “stuck in a groove,” she claims, by repeating the “Grand Narrative” of exceptionally gifted composers based on the model of the white, male, lonely, creative genius (45).<sup>45</sup> Surely, the Yehudi Menuhin School has a far from ordinary curriculum that does not simply align with the Australian tertiary music education institutes on which Macarthur bases her critique. Alma’s school has a staff of high reputation, good resources, reduced fees and scholarships for musically-gifted students of less wealthy families, and a well-defined philosophy that goes against many trends now typical in conservatory education.

And yet, the school bears the name and inspiration of one of the names that made it into the Grand Narrative of virtuoso performers. It prepares aspiring professionals for an exclusive career in the field of Western art music. What if Alma creates something that challenges the boundaries of this domain? What if she challenges precisely the rules on the basis of which transformational quality has been defined measured? Who will be the legitimate and capable “experts” to judge and attribute this creation as *her* significant achievement to the domain? These questions signal some of the limitations of perceiving and understanding exceptionality in the present.

### **1.7 Limits of Exceptionality**

What can be concluded at this point about exceptional abilities in the case of musical prodigies in the past and present? The experience of exceptional abilities is not so much limited by the strong presence of the figure of Mozart in prodigy assemblages as by the one-dimensional comparison in which the figure commonly partakes. The one-dimensional movement occurs when a fixed set of aspects is taken to define exceptionality; aspects which

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<sup>45</sup> The structure of these education programs does not support the recognition of actual novelty in other than individualist (i.e. masculine) modes of creative production. Macarthur (2010) provides a compelling argument for the need of “counter-actualizations,” whereby women are “inserted” as active participants in composition. Examples include (group) student composition projects that challenges boundaries imposed by the curriculum, the traditional concert hall setting and the divide between Western (“serious”) art music and popular genres (82-87; 151-171).

happen to resonate with the case of Mozart. The experience of exceptional abilities cannot be reduced to the subjective experience of an individual listener, because the so-called “external” forces of history, discourse, and social and cultural norms always partake in shaping individual experience. At the same time, limitations and variations arise through what one has experienced before and what one considers to be humanly (and humanely) possible in the future. The experience of exceptional abilities, therefore, cannot be captured in ordinary models of time as a linear succession of past, present and future. Rather, exceptionality requires a specific configuration of temporality whereby the expectation and promise of transformation to some extent *prescribes* the desirable course of events in the future. As long as Mozart remains the most-cited exemplar of exceptionality, prodigies will have a hard time expressing exceptionality. Their actual performances need to relate in very specific way in order to be recognized as a prodigy in first place, and to produce a difference that is recognized as creative and significant in the second place. Only under very specific conditions, in other words, can a young musician in the past and present perform both *as a prodigy* and *as an exceptional prodigy*.

A one-dimensional comparison of traits is a much simpler task than to think through, firstly, what *true* exceptionality could mean, and secondly, how the experience and perception of this truly unprecedented, singular exceptionality could be recognized. New directions of research proposed along the lines of the “feminine” perspective offer routes towards a non-comparative approach, which include a focus on experience, on the child’s perspective, on process of development, on emotional and other modes of sensitivity, and on ability. Two lines of inquiry will follow in the subsequent chapters. First, it will be asked how prodigies in the present are creative. The notion of creativity is currently being reviewed and debated in giftedness studies. What do the changing views on creativity offer to reframe the traditional emphasis on composition and improvisation in prodigy research? This is the theme of chapter two. In chapter three, Feldman’s co-incidence theory on the nature of prodigiousness will be taken up from the perspective of (feminist) futures. It will offer a new outlook on the changing contents and meanings of exceptionality, creativity and individuality for future prodigies.

## Chapter 2 How Are Prodigies Creative? A Survey of Prodigies on YouTube

### 2.1 Introduction

Dictionary definitions of creativity widely mention the faculty of being creative, the ability or power to create, and inventiveness. The Oxford English Dictionary further notes ‘the use of imagination or original ideas to create something, especially in the production of an artistic work.’ More nuanced, differentiated and contrasting understandings of creativity are deployed in a wide range of academic debates.<sup>1</sup> A full consideration of these understandings exceeds the scope of this study, but some will be touched upon later in this chapter.

In the sources and research literature on prodigies discussed up until this point, the notion of creativity has surfaced as a trait of exceptional prodigies, specifically. Based on the distinction between performance and composition in Western art music, prodigy scholars juxtapose the creative skills of composition and improvisation against the “reproductive” skills of performance. These reproductive abilities are most common among prodigies (and among musicians at any age and level, for that matter). The distinction, I have suggested, functions as a qualitative marker and measure of exceptionality. Creativity is most often approached as a one-dimensional notion. It may comprise degrees (of “more creative” and “less creative”), but essentially it assumes one axis with “extremely creative” at the one end, and “non-creative” (i.e. reproductive, repetitive) at the other.

Other literature attempts to approach creativity as more than a one-dimensional notion, however a hierarchy based on cultural significance often stays in place. Psychologist R.A. Ochse (1990), for example, describes three types of creativity: 1) a kind that is expressed in a flexible, imaginative, or non-authoritarian lifestyle, in interpersonal functioning, or attitude; 2) a kind of creativity needed to score high on creativity tests; and 3) a creativity possessed by producers of cultural value, where original works are recognized by expert opinion as having exceptional value to the culture. Although this view accounts for different *kinds*, rather than

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<sup>1</sup> For summaries of creativity research in the social sciences, see Sternberg and Lubart (1999); Kozbelt et al. (2010). Creativity has recently become a prominent theme in musicology, particularly in the interdisciplinary field of music performance studies which encompasses humanities, social and natural sciences perspectives. The UK-based Research Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice, for example, has creativity as a core theme. A five-book series on the respective strands of this research project is announced to be published by Oxford University Press in 2015. See also Hargreaves (2012), Cook (2003).

merely *degrees* of creativity, the primary focus of Ochse's study on the "roots of artistic excellence" and "genius" reinstalls the privilege of the third type.

Another differentiated view can be found in a co-authored study of Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi and Gardner (1994). The framework, outlined in their first chapter, integrates three models to form a giftedness perspective on creativity. At the widest scale this framework posits Csikszentmihalyi's "Domain-Individual-Field-Interaction" model.<sup>2</sup> Zooming in on the level of the individual, secondly, the authors introduce Howard Gruber's Darwinian distinction between knowledge, purpose, and affect (Wallace and Gruber 1989).<sup>3</sup> Adding more distinction to the level of knowledge or cognition of the individual, thirdly, it introduces another tripartite distinction made by Feldman: reflectiveness (based in consciousness), transformational impulses (based in the unconscious), and "changing the world" (the effect of the interaction between the first and second on the external world, the extra-individual) (1-46). The authors subsequently illustrate the workings of this framework in a number of essays. These essays, by and large, foreground "exemplary" cases of creative genius (i.e. eminent, white male individuals),<sup>4</sup> and emphasize the value of creativity as a sign of cultural evolution and human progress.<sup>5</sup> One of Feldman's individual contributions to the edition stands out through a situated and autobiographical perspective: it demonstrates how creativity exceeds consciousness and individuality by drawing the event of the emergence of his own theory of co-incidence.<sup>6</sup>

In a more recent address of prodigies and creativity, Feldman and Morelock (2011a) shed light on a differentiated and changing set of perspectives, which emerge from the increasing

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<sup>2</sup> Csikszentmihalyi's distinction between field and domain is more refined in comparison to Feldman's (1986) interchangeable use of the same terms in his earlier work. I will elaborate on their respective positions in chapter three.

<sup>3</sup> The authors note that this level of the individual is the most common entry point for psychological research.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. MacArthur (2010); Silverman and Miller (2009); Batterby (1989) and the critique of eminence discussed in chapter one.

<sup>5</sup> Gardner and Wolf's (1994) contribution draws on case studies of Einstein and Freud (47-68). The evolutionist perspective most prominently appears in Csikszentmihalyi's chapter 'Memos versus Genes: Notes from the Culture Wars' (1994, 159-172). A critique of the evolutionist perspective will be given in chapter three of this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> In his experience of the creative process, the recurring dream of an amusement park ride played a significant role. It testified of the role of the unconscious, while a unique coordination of events and encounters with others lead to the eventual "Eureka moment" (Feldman et al. 1994, 103-134). I will come back to this essay in chapter three.

exchange of ideas across the social sciences.<sup>7</sup> New issues include forms of *collaborative* creativity and the recognition of changing cultural values. The issues that connect prodigy research to creativity research, according to the authors, are fivefold: 1) creativity is domain-specific; 2) creativity is a process rather than a static way of being, both on the level of the individual and on the level of the domain; 3) creativity depends on changing judgment (what may be called creative in the past may no longer be seen as such in the future); 4) creativity is ‘many things, not a single thing’ (263); and 5) creativity is increasingly understood as a collaborative<sup>8</sup> phenomenon.

In chapter three, I will elaborate on the notion of “domain,” which emerges repeatedly in the aforementioned points. For the current discussion, it is important that Feldman and Morelock observe a movement away from testing isolated “traits” in creativity research. Creativity scholars, in other words, no longer rely on approaches that sustain the idea of a specific profile of a creative personality, or creativity as *being* (262). In what appears to be a response to critiques of universalism, creativity research has begun to recognize a variety of ways to be creative within particular forms and contexts. Such variations may consist arise in creativity’s the strength, range, and reverberation of creativity, or in its transcendence of constraints (263-264). Most importantly, it is considered that aspects typically associated with “reproductive” performance are now considered as being included under the notion of creativity. These aspects include, for example, interpretive efforts, expression, emotion, and depth of meaning. Their potentially transformative effect on the domain may be found in changes of performance traditions, concert repertoires, listening cultures, and so on (264).

Unfortunately, Feldman and Morelock classify these performance aspects (interpretation, expression, and so on) as ‘more modest forms of creativity’ (263) within a range stretching from the most common up to the most extreme. They state: ‘Few would confuse [these modest forms] with a singular contribution that leaves the domain changed in fundamental ways’

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<sup>7</sup> See also the earlier version of their chapter, Feldman and Morelock (1999). Cf. Howe (1999). Although recognizing differences, Howe maintains adult eminence as a core ingredient of his approach to prodigies and creativity.

<sup>8</sup> Feldman and Morelock (2011a) note that collaboration is perhaps not the most suitable term to describe the interactions between prodigies, parents, and teachers, because ‘[it] implies shared if not equal participation in a creative process’ (264). Instead, the relationships may be better described as ‘preparation, support and enabling than true collaboration’ (ibid). A critical consideration of the term “equal” and of the child-adult distinction may offer further insights on this point.

(264).<sup>9</sup> Problematically, this statement sustains the privilege of those who have left a “lasting mark.” Creativity continues to be approached on a one-dimensional axis, whereby prodigiousness of the kind of Mozart or Einstein remains the highest achievement. Effectively, the authors do not succeed to depart from the interpretation of creativity as a stable set of traits, opposed by another set of “non-creative” traits.

The same problem is apparent in the distinction between “prodigious achievement” and “creative achievement.” Feldman and Morelock propose that the first is characterized by ‘mastering a domain,’ whereas the second stands out for ‘transforming existing techniques,’ or bringing new meanings to a domain (ibid.). Performance *within* a domain, no matter how exceptional, is thus understood as distinctly non-creative. Feldman and Morelock state that prodigious performance ‘leaves the domain essentially unchanged’ to the extent that ‘the domain presents the same challenges to those who aspire to master it as it has before the prodigy did so’ (ibid.). The findings of the current chapter will turn out however challenge this final statement.

Instead of drawing a line between prodigious and creative achievements, the present chapter inquires into *prodigious creativity*: In which ways are prodigy performances creative? Consider the following suggestion made by Feldman and Morelock:

The fact that a child is able to amaze a sophisticated audience with an astonishing display of technical virtuosity suggests that such a performance is both unusual and distinctively appropriate enough to be labeled “creative.” (ibid.)

Here, Feldman and Morelock touch on a different interpretation of creativity that better suits the direction of the current undertaking. I propose to consider a prodigy’s *capacity to amaze* as a starting point to address prodigious creativity. The survey of prodigies on YouTube asks how present prodigies follow and diverge from the Mozart figure<sup>10</sup> as a way to highlighting the slightly paradoxical intersection of “unusual” and “distinctly appropriate” in

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<sup>9</sup> The authors show nonetheless willing and destined to move beyond this hierarchy. In an earlier version of the same article, Feldman and Morelock (1999, 450) explicitly introduce their classification as an attempt to move away from the widely used distinction between “big C” and “small c” creativity (which map onto ‘high art/culture’ and ordinary daily life activities). Adding a “middle c” and proposing to view the differentiation on a horizontal axis (like the keys on a piano) rather than vertical, they hope to reduce the hierarchical implication. The horizontal keyboard, however, implies a linear scale from low to high that by no means escape gendered connotations. Cf. the respective views of feminist musicologists Cusick (1993, 10n20), Tiainen (2007, 160) and James (2013, 111) on this point.

<sup>10</sup> The Mozart figure and its role in prodigy performances of the past and present has been addressed in chapter one.

the cited passage—the first suggesting a difference, the second a kind of identity, repetition or sameness. In further resonance with the cited phrase, the focus will be on audiences. I will discuss audience responses found online alongside personal reflections, because I count myself as one audience member among others.<sup>11</sup> Although my position may fit the label of “sophisticated” (to reinvoké the cited passage), I do not intend to either privilege or exclude certain perspectives on the basis of this notion. Such a boundary would work against the very aim of this study to uncover new and unknown modes of creativity amidst changing times and changing cultures. With feminist research, I share an insistent doubt—which implies neither a rejection nor a presupposition—of all norms prescribing sophistication, relevance and significance. Prodigious creativity, thus, may be found in the relation of continuity and divergence between prodigy performances and the Mozart figure in the past and present.

## **2.2 A First Encounter**

In the previous chapter I introduced Alma Deutscher, who is, in many respects, the most Mozart-like prodigy in the present. However, there are other remarkable young musicians today who travel around and impress audiences with their exceptional performances. Allow me to introduce Nuron Mukumiy. At only eight years of age, he performed Mozart’s famous piano concerto in D minor (K. 466) with the Uzbeki Symphony Orchestra, a choice of repertoire that neatly fits the prodigy tradition. The most remarkable aspect of the performance, however, is that he not only played the solo piano part, but also conducted the orchestra with decisive, professional and cheerful gestures. In order to understand how prodigies impress their audiences, it is necessary to go beyond distanced observation or listing traits and move towards more qualitative modes of analysis. To be amazed may be best understood as a matter of experience that depends on many factors including physical location, personal taste, history of learning, and one’s emotional state of mind.<sup>12</sup> It not only requires a certain physical, cognitive and, emotional openness, but also a technological, social and cultural “co-incidence” attuned to the prodigy phenomenon. But how to operationalize

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<sup>11</sup> My focus on audience response parallels the musicological interest in the notion in analogue of “reader response” criticism in literary theory. The term of audience response is further used to describe interactive technologies that enable voting, answering or other forms of participation. Both the theoretical, experience-oriented and the practical, technological sense of the term are relevant to the current investigation. A full discussion of the relevant literature, however, falls outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>12</sup> See also the introductory discussion and elaboration on “co-incidence” at the beginnings of the previous and subsequent chapter, respectively.

such a necessity? An exploratory thick description<sup>13</sup> of a personal “prodigy experience” serves to outline some of the problems that emerge when studying prodigies in the present day.

My first encounter with Nuron Mukumiya took place in early 2010, when I found a video of the aforementioned performance on YouTube.<sup>14</sup> It was one of the first prodigy videos I had watched, stimulating and inspiring the current research. The video was recorded and uploaded in 2008. (Indeed, prodigies in the present are in fact often already prodigies in and of the past.) It shows an unedited performance registration from a single camera situated right directly behind the orchestra. The image is of low quality, and at times unsteady when the camera is moved. It looks like a recording made for private purposes, not a professional production.<sup>15</sup> I see an orchestra from back and side in the foreground, and a medium-size auditorium in the background. With some empty seats and only partly visible, the audience seems to count around eighty, surely no more than a hundred visitors. A little boy, hardly taller than the sitting orchestra players, enters the stage. He stands in front of the orchestra and starts conducting. Dressed in a mini-jacket with a slightly oversize bowtie, the young conductor appears firm and confident in his gestures and facial expression. The camera moves and zooms in on his hands when the solo piano part starts; at this point the silhouette of a dark-haired child can be discerned in the audience. He is sitting near to the front row, with a woman at his side. Are these perhaps his mother and two-year-older brother? The piano playing is as resolute as the conducting: a little hasty perhaps but in a way that suits the young musician’s age. If the sound was played to me without visual or other information, I would have guessed it was a semi-professional performance. Both orchestra and soloist play on a respectable level, however tuning, timing and a few audible wrong notes mark a limited quality. In fact, the performance reminded me of my own playing a few years earlier: I played

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<sup>13</sup> See Geertz (1973). This standard ethnographic method suits many requirements of “situated” feminist research (Haraway 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Editorial note: source descriptions and URL’s to all YouTube videos and user comments cited from this point onwards are provided in appendix A, table 1. To avoid confusion with bibliographical references, videos and comments will be cited by family name or user name *without* year of publication. User names (e.g. Paddler16, Akabubu2002) are used when real names are not explicitly given in the video title, description or content. User names are given to identify authors of user comments. References to videos other than those included in the survey (such as the one discussed in the previous chapter) and other online sources given in footnotes.

<sup>15</sup> The full concert is in fact divided over a number of videos, which is a logical consequence of YouTube’s upload restrictions: the length of the concert exceeds the maximum of ten minutes for a single video. In first instance, I watched only the first video, which captures the most salient aspects of the performance.



the same piece during my conservatory studies on a level comparable to the performance of this eight year old (an unsettling thought). User comments collected for the survey in this chapter suggest that comparisons of this kind form a significant part of many prodigy experiences.

This “prodigy experience,” as I call it, was partly anticipated and shaped through the specific context of events. At the time I was a student trainee involved in the organization of the Liszt Junior Academy, a prestigious master class for talented young pianists to take held in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in May 2010. I was responsible for the daily affairs concerning the six participants, including their travels and accommodation. All participants, between thirteen and seventeen years old, had proven their excellence by winning or scoring highly at various piano competitions worldwide. They had traveled from various places across Europe, Asia and the United States to take part in this master class. For some, it was their first trip to Europe. My contact with these “growing-up”<sup>16</sup> prodigies and their parents took place first via email and later in person during the time of their visit. I was fascinated and curious after reading the impressive biographies that I received at an early stage. Then I decided to look for a preview, some audiovisual “evidence” of their skills, on the Internet. I found videos of only four of the young pianists, mostly comprising concert registrations from recent competition performances. Nuron’s video was the only one showing a pianist in the age range defined as prodigious (younger than ten). Even among prodigy videos, Nuron’s performance is exceptional for showing an expressive conductor—an unusual skill among prodigy pianists.<sup>17</sup>

After having met Nuron in real life during his stay in the Netherlands, I am convinced that he was indeed a real, extraordinary, and exceptional prodigy, most of all because his vivid personality (as marked in the video) which still characterized his being and doing at the age of fourteen. When I asked him about the video, he explained how the performance had been organized. The head of the school orchestra at his primary school (a specialized music school in Tashkent, Uzbekistan) happened to be affiliated with National Symphony Orchestra of Uzbekistan. This person noticed Nuron’s skills and arranged his conducting lessons. He offered the invitation to play Mozart’s piano concerto with the orchestra. However, Nuron explained his motivation to actually accept the offer as follows: His mother had told him that

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Goldsmith’s (2000) deployment of this term.

<sup>17</sup> However, one of the most famous musical prodigies on YouTube is a conducting prodigy, the three-year-old Jonathan Okseniuk. See appendix A.

she did not believe it would be possible to both conduct and play simultaneously. Challenged by her disbelief, Nuron took up the invitation in order to prove his mother wrong.

At the same time, a comparison to other prodigies, as well as the infamous “prodigy profile” (of Mozart-like traits), was inescapable during my recollections, reflections and repeated return to Nuron’s video over the subsequent years. While Nuron’s performance stood out as exceptional among his fellow academy participants (of whom I did not find childhood videos at all, and amongst whom there were no pianist-conductors to my knowledge), his performance cannot easily be understood as exceptionally *creative*. Unlike Wolfgang and Alma, Nuron’s performance lacks the creative traits of composition and improvisation. Instead, it shows the “reproductive” performance of a piece of standard prodigy repertoire at a semi-professional level. Following Feldman and Morelock’s (2011a) categorization, discussed above, the performance may be called creative on a modest rather than exceptional level.

Nevertheless, there are many resonances with the Mozart figure, and even with the actual child that Mozart is said to have been. In addition to the choice of instrument, repertoire, concert setting, and visual presentation, Nuron most strikingly shares with Wolfgang<sup>18</sup> a playful personality and a love for running gags.<sup>19</sup> Another resonance can be found on the level of family and travels. Mozart’s skills offered the ground and opportunity to travel with his father and sister across Europe. The concert tours provided an income for the family. Without speculating about economic and personal motivations in the case of Nuron, the political situation in Uzbekistan (marked by two major terrorist attacks in Tashkent in 2004) clearly formed an environment in which *any* opportunity to travel was most certainly welcome.

Nuron first discovered the piano through the practice and lessons of an older sibling, his brother Naufal. When Nuron took the invitation to study at the Purcell School of Music in London on a full scholarship, his mother and brother Naufal came along. Naufal also pursues

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<sup>18</sup> I use Mozart’s first name at this point to treat both prodigies in an equal manner, and to emphasize that Mozart was a prodigy like many others.

<sup>19</sup> This idea presupposes that the personality presented in the famous picture movie ‘Amadeus.’ after Peter Shaffer’s play, which returns in some of Mozart’s letters, is to some extent accountable. See Feldman (1994b) for source citations which reveal Mozart’s pleasure in language jokes. Nuron revealed himself to be a leading entertainer among his fellow piano students during the time of his visit to the Netherlands. His repeated jokes included that he addressed a sixteen-year-old female Hungarian fellow student by the name “Bela Bartok” and made a show out of drinking as much freely provided soft drinks as possible. His leading social role, however, may also have been strengthened through his fluency in the English language. Only one other Chinese sixteen-year-old student had a comparable level of proficiency.

a professional career in piano, but has been less successful at competitions. The similarity of Naufal's position to Maria Anna (Nannerl) Mozart, sister of the famous Wolfgang, is striking. She was not only herself a gifted musician, but also participated in the family's travels while remaining in the shadow of the attention for her younger brother.<sup>20</sup>

Is it at all possible to address prodigious creativity without falling back into a one-on-one comparison of traits with the Mozart image whilst maintaining a level that exceeds personal taste and opinion? I will carve a way between these two options by attending to details of context, event, and experience throughout this chapter. While Mozart-like exceptionalism may be found on other levels than the traits of composition and improvisation alone, as Nuron's case affirms, a prodigy's unique *capacity to amaze*, may yet be found on other levels.

### **2.3 YouTube: Context, Medium or Stage of Prodigy Performance?**

In psychological studies that locate the root of prodigiousness on a neuro-biological or cognitive level, the specificity of a performance environment would certainly not count as a crucial element. Rather, it would fall under external circumstances or context, as Shavinina had it.<sup>21</sup> The current investigation, however, does not presuppose a definite gap between individual human being and a (human and nonhuman) "world out there." Such divisions are co-produced rather than pre-existent in prodigy performances, according to the performative ontological credo: being does not precede doing.<sup>22</sup> I start instead from an experience in which being has yet to take shape, at a moment before boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, text and context come into place. At this point, performance environments gain significance. Specific material conditions, such as architecture and technology must be counted among the forces that co-produce prodigies, as much in traditional concert settings as in online video performances. It is with and within these environments that prodigy, exceptionalism and the possibility of prodigious creativity take shape.

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<sup>20</sup> To broaden the perspective on important relations—or "collaborations" (cf. Feldman and Morelock 2011a, 264)—in prodigies creative lives, it is worth to further investigate the role of both Nannerl and Naufal as "patron-siblings." Naufal unmistakably acted as a patron of his younger brother, despite only a few years of age difference and notwithstanding his own musical ambitions. To give one example: Naufal was the one communicating with me via email to arrange Nuron's visit to the Netherlands in 2010. After I left a comment 'Great! How old is Nuron here?' on one of Nuron's videos more recently, a swift and concise came from a user under his name: 'seven years and two months ;).'

<sup>21</sup> See chapter one.

<sup>22</sup> See introduction.

This part of research concerns the online video sharing platform YouTube, the most vibrant, popular and accessible environment in which musical prodigies can be presently found. In this study, YouTube will not be approached as a context or background of performance, nor shall it serve as the *medium* in a standard communication scheme. The standard model, wherein the website could be called the medium through which a performance (“message”) is delivered by a performer (“sender”) to a listener/viewer (“receiver”), has been criticized on various grounds. Humanities scholars, including feminist theorists, have questioned not only the notions of authorship and intentionality (messages may be received without an intentional sender), but also the apparent transparency of the medium. An alternative approach, frequently found in contemporary media studies, foregrounds the material and lived dimensions of the medium. Media theorists Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009) follow this trend in their study of YouTube as a cultural system. Rather than as ‘a weightless depository of content,’ they approach the site as a productive part of many people’s daily lives, as shaping behaviors and identities (8). YouTube’s medium-specificity and shaping effect on culture can be recognized in the gradually decreasing relevance of distinctive categories separating professional from amateur, commercial from community video productions.

[These distinctions] are based in industrial logics more at home in the context of the broadcast media [...] It is more helpful to shift from thinking about media production, distribution, and consumption to thinking about YouTube in terms of a continuum of cultural participation. (57)

Just like the sender-receiver model of communication, the tripartite model of production distribution and consumption, is still a widely used, but no longer uncriticized, approach in media studies. In what follows, YouTube will be approached as a *stage*: a material-discursive assemblage that co-shapes the distinctions between prodigy and (human and nonhuman) environment in prodigy performances. Although I endorse the critique of aforementioned models (context, sender-receiver, production-reception), each provide distinctions that are useful and indispensable for pragmatic reasons. When drawing on their terms in what follows, I do not ascribe to an exclusive or universal meaning of either model. The stage, as an alternative starting point, is more central than contextual, and more material and agential than a medium (even though online environments are often associated with transparency and bodiless connections). As a conceptual tool, moreover, the notion of stage invites a cross-

historical comparison between YouTube and the concert environments of prodigies in the past.<sup>23</sup>

YouTube is not only a stage of performance and co-producer of culture, it is also an *archive*.<sup>24</sup> It collects and stores audiovisual traces and other data (viewing statistics, user comments) of past performances. In a visionary statement on the relevance of YouTube's archival function, Burgess and Green envisaged YouTube to become

a record of contemporary global popular culture (including vernacular and everyday culture) in video form, produced and evaluated according to the logics of cultural value that emerge from the collective choices of the distributed YouTube user community. [...] YouTube is thus evolving into a massive, heterogeneous, but for the most part accidental and disordered, public archive. (88)

As far as the current state of affairs in 2013 testifies, this prediction appears to ring true. But the archive may have relevance beyond a mere storage of (traces of) cultures and identities. In his new materialist reading of Foucault and the archive, new materialist philosopher Manuel Delanda (2003) argues that the historical-scholarly tendency to focus on case studies of unique human individuals has effectively persisted in the ideological and socio-constructivist turns to identity construction. Foucault's archive, however, locates a core problem in the 'compulsory objectification through archival identities' rather than in 'subjectivity interiority' (13).<sup>25</sup> Delanda's essay, to which I return in more detail in chapter three, confirms the relevance of YouTube's archival function as one of the external, objective layers that take part in constructing prodigious individuality.

Coming to another aspect of the stage, YouTube videos reach an undeniably impressive size of *audience* that stretches far beyond the nineteenth-century concert halls in terms of physical, geographical, and cultural location. On YouTube's scale, one or two thousand visitors constitute an audience that compares to the private setting of a living room concert.<sup>26</sup> A moderately popular video easily reaches fifty thousand to one hundred thousand, or even a million, views as soon as the link starts to circulate on other online platforms (e.g. Facebook

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<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to German musicologist Elena Ungeheuer for bringing the cross-historical potential of the concept of *stage* under my attention.

<sup>24</sup> See Featherstone (2006) on the adaptation of Foucault's and Derrida's writings on the archive in digital contexts. Cf. Assmann (2008); Gehl (2009)

<sup>25</sup> I elaborate on Delanda's essay in chapter three.

<sup>26</sup> Visitor rates are tracked and prominently displayed in the viewing number under each video on YouTube.

or news websites). The only other stages that reach a comparable size of audience might be commercial and national television stations in the largest countries.

Compared to newspapers and other written sources, another distinctive feature of YouTube is that it offers an *audiovisual* trace of prodigy performances. Recording technology allows a performance to be replayed again and again and gives the opportunity to (re)experience a performance that took place years ago. This audiovisual event differs qualitatively from the experience of reading—even the most imaginative and poetic—written reports (or printed graphics).<sup>27</sup> In a sense, audiovisual traces stretch the temporality of the performance event by reaching out from the past to a new listening and viewing experience in the present (with endless possibilities for the future). Recordings, of audiovisual or other kind, are often characterized as of a categorically different nature than ‘live’ musical events. In the ideal form of the latter, performer and listener (multiple listeners, in a conventional concert setting) are physically present in the same room at the same time. It is undeniable that the different settings lead to a difference in experience: live concerts produce a sound, sight, feel and smell that qualitatively differs from a desktop-bound setting. In the latter, the (typically solitary) internet user stumbles across the video in random search of entertainment and has the manipulative power to pause, replay and stop the performance at any time.<sup>28</sup>

Critical theories of “liveness” and mediation, however, have argued that *all* experiences are mediated as well as embodied (e.g. Auslander 1999). This means that although visiting a concert hall and browsing online videos lead to very different experiences, the difference is not a matter of “liveness.” Neither can it be said that the former is a more “musical” experience, nor that listeners in the conventional setting are necessarily more engaged and more in sync with the performer’s intention (provided that there is one). Consider that even specialized critics in a traditional concert setting hardly ever agree on the actual quality of a

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<sup>27</sup> I deliberately emphasize the performative event through which written text enters into thought and experience as a way to prevent a reduction of writing into static language, and language into facts or objectivity. Following a passage cited earlier (see introduction, footnote 5), Derrida (1976) points out that the trace comes *before* the distinction of regions of sensibility, which makes a “natural” hierarchy between the sound-imprint and visual (graphic) imprint implausible (24). Cf. Tiainen (2007, 149) and Fox-Keller and Grontkowski (1983) on the relevance of a “sonic turn.”

<sup>28</sup> In daily speech as well as in academia, the difference is often referred to as a matter of originality, value and intensity: the near proximity of musicians would allow a deeper experience of and engagement with the music. Musicologists have even long continued to look down at or totally ignore the musical workings and value of recordings (Leech-Wilkinson 2009, 18).

specific performer. On occasion, one wonders whether two critics, describing the same concert in radically different terms, were actually present at the same location. Did they actually witness the same performance? Or did the same event produce a variety of singular experiences, some shared among many listeners, others uniquely tied to an individual? The current investigation aims to account for such a variety of responses and tries to refrain, or at least postpone, a prioritization of specific responses based on expertise, values, tradition or apparent relevance for research.

A particular feature of the YouTube website offers insight in the variety of audience responses. Viewers are able to rate the video by clicking “like” or “dislike” and also they can leave a comment after logging in with a user account. In practice, it turns out that only a small percentage of viewers take this opportunity (Cheng et al. 2008, 235). Nonetheless, the comments are useful because they are still high in number and show a great variety. Comments often echo famous stereotypes and public opinions. They cover backgrounds from lay to informed critics and experts, and reveal a number of distinct aspects of present prodigies, as I will show. Reading them as an addition and extension of the written homages and critiques on nineteenth-century prodigy performances, the comments allow a uniquely varied insight into prodigies’ capacity to amaze; on prodigious creativity and the impact and nature of prodigy performances.

The website’s design further stimulates a very specific way of browsing videos through lists of “suggested videos” that appear in column right next to each video. It is through these recommendations that I found most of the videos for this survey. Cheng et al. (2008) suggest that this kind of browsing leads to a clustering of videos that fits the “small-world”<sup>29</sup> phenomenon. This key concept in social network theory is better known as “six degrees of separation” and describes ‘networks that are neither completely random, nor completely regular’ (235). Having spent a considerable amount of time browsing the site for prodigy videos, it does indeed result in a relatively small number of highly popular videos continuously returning high in the list.

## **2.4 A Survey of Musical Prodigy Videos**

The method of this survey is based on Burgess and Green’s (2009) middle-scale rough sample survey, which offers a middle way between the specificity of case studies and large-scale

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<sup>29</sup> Following the original publication on this topic by social psychologist Stanley Milgram (1967), the “small-world” phenomenon has become a central theme in social network theory.

quantitative analysis in information and culture studies.<sup>30</sup> Burgess and Green's survey was designed to examine the shape and scope of YouTube's "common culture." The study mapped 4320 videos, which had received the highest viewing ratings over a few 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' (10). Further uses, they suggest, may include 'identifying controversies and mapping aesthetic characteristics across particular cultural forms' (ibid.). The current study, based on a much smaller sample of twenty-three videos, singles out one particular area within YouTube's cultural territory: the subculture or "niche"<sup>31</sup> of musical prodigy videos.<sup>32</sup>

For understanding the prodigy niche correctly, it is important to emphasize once more that the website's interface co-determines 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 as distinct as it may seem. On the one hand, it is very hard 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 seamlessly attaches to that of less impressive, absolute beginners (of all ages) and adult professionals. The selection made for this study aims to illustrate rather than foreclose the connections to these overlapping fields. It includes the most popular videos of the musical prodigy "niche" in the widest sense.

The primary entry point, however, is a resonance with one or more aspects of the Mozart-figure.<sup>33</sup> This has led to the inclusion of a relatively large number of piano prodigies.

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<sup>30</sup> With large scale analysis I refer to Cheng et al. (2008). Although offering the possibility to scan a vast amount of data, important aspects of video content (associative content and all that exceeds the key terms) as well as the semi-structured browsing experience remain under-researched. In prodigy research, as noted in chapter one, case studies are the norm (cf. McPherson and Lehmann 2012, 32).

<sup>31</sup>The authors describe YouTube as a cultural system that inhabits numerous "niche" cultures, including the highly popular "cat videos," flash mobs and road accidents (Burgess and Green 2009, 7).

<sup>32</sup> The method I propose undoubtedly resonates with many issues that are currently gaining worldwide attention and institutional support under the header of "Digital Humanities." This topic, however, falls outside the scope of the thesis.

<sup>33</sup> Video searches were conducted on the terms "prodigy," "musical prodigy" and "next Mozart." To increase the geographical and cultural breadth, further searches included translations of the term "prodigy" in



Although the sample does not aim to be representative, piano remains a highly popular instrument among prodigies.<sup>34</sup> The focus on piano prodigies is further inspired by my own expertise and experience. I received piano lessons from the age of five and was trained in the classical performance tradition with five years of conservatory study. Apart from the earlier mentioned junior academy, I have met young gifted musicians in various professional contexts through my work as a performing pianist and teacher.

To enhance coherency and consistency, the following criteria have been strictly applied: The survey only includes videos of musicians *younger than ten* at the moment of recording. When multiple videos of a single prodigy were found, the video with the *highest number of views* has been selected.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, videos have been selected which show a quality and level of performance that exceeds the expected level at the given age (but this is a less systematic point that leaves room for interpretation). Rather than performance at an adult professional level, the *promise* of reaching such a level in the future appeared more appropriate, especially in the case of very young prodigies. The latter point is obviously much harder to apply in musical genres with less familiar and standardized paths of development than “classical piano performance,” with which I am most familiar. From the outset, it is thus clear that classical piano performance remains a privileged domain.

In chapter one I have argued that the notion of the prodigy and the Mozart figure are historical and culturally bound up with each other. As a consequence, a survey of prodigies will 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 very specific resonances with the Mozart-image: think for example of how the lonely artist/genius image does not match the context of folk music genres, where musical performance is a collaborative practice. Another limitation of this study is cultural and linguistic. Although I have tried to include videos with various languages and geographic origins, some national cultures are more inclined towards celebrating exceptional performance than others.

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German, Dutch, French, Russian, Korean, Chinese and Japanese. Next to search terms, videos were found through the “suggested videos” lists or by other ways of referral (e.g. a link on other social media).

<sup>34</sup> The large amount of piano prodigies further enables a more detailed study of instrument-specific performance aspects, such as repertoire, technique and expressive body movements. An analysis of this kind could not be included in this thesis. However, available data have been collected for the purpose of future research.

<sup>35</sup> This led to the inclusion of another video of Alma Deutscher than the one discussed in the previous chapter.

The list was compiled during partly structured browsing sessions over the course of three years.<sup>36</sup> Many video titles mention age and instrument, while only some include literal references to the terms “prodigy” or “next Mozart.”<sup>37</sup> Obviously, the real number of talented, even prodigious, young musicians performing on YouTube exceeds the survey on many levels. TV talent shows constitute an important genre in which many talented young musicians can be found. Another area to be further investigated is that of the institutionalized version of talent shows, music competitions. While some videos from these settings have been included, the online archive could not be explored exhaustively. The musical performances are so numerous and distinct that they merit further study elsewhere.

### *Survey Results*<sup>38</sup>

Appendix A, tables 1-3 provide the assembled data on twenty-three prodigy videos (video and source descriptions, prodigy and performance details, and audience response). Appendix B provides a selection of written comments per video. The videos were uploaded between 2007 and 2012. This range was not set beforehand, but could be explained as a result of the site’s history and development into a mainstream media platform (the site was officially launched in 2005). The date of recording is not always given and may lay many years back. 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 three (Akim Camara, Richard Hoffmann) to ten years old (Yannick Koffi).<sup>39</sup>

While all prodigies are shown in performance, the settings vary widely (see table 2). The private setting of a family home is typically marked by a child dressed in pajamas (Jonathan

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<sup>36</sup> Viewing data were updated in April 2013.

<sup>37</sup> While the algorithm behind the “suggested videos” is too complex to discuss here, some browsing experience reveals that a combination of matching terms and high number of views tightens the connections between a small group of prodigy videos. Besides, it occasionally produces “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 the survey), after which it steadily acquired over 800 thousand views. This can be explained through the fact that one only discovers the dissatisfactory content after clicking (which increases the number of views by one). <http://youtu.be/N4C2SQEJXGs> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>38</sup> For convenient access to all videos sources described in appendix A and B, a playlist has been compiled. <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLD3rJspnrgriGmQGCgU9frsZUfX00DK2v> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>39</sup> The upper age limit results from the choice to follow Feldman’s (1986) definition.

Okseniuk, Tsung Tsung<sup>40</sup>). Others settings include the traditional concert hall (e.g. Paddler16<sup>41</sup>) and several TV formats (e.g. Gavin George). Table 3 gives insight in viewing statistics and audience response and lists the twenty-three videos in order of popularity (number of views). Conclusions and implications on this topic will be discussed in a separate section. For a correct understanding of the user comments and ratings in terms of audience response, it is important to note that only a very small group of viewers respond.<sup>42</sup> It shows that the audience response in the form of likes, dislikes and comments is very low. The consideration of audience response thus focuses on this small fraction. Appendix B, finally, offers a selection of the written comments on each video.<sup>43</sup> Next to numerous exclamations of praise and worry about a “normal” childhood, some new themes appear that will be discussed in more detail.

## 2.5 A Comparison Between Musical Prodigies Across Two Centuries

Picking up on the exploration of prodigies in the past and present, the discussion of data will be opened by a comparison between survey findings to the themes discussed in chapter one. A number of similarities and differences appear. To start with the first, it becomes evident that musical prodigies continue to exist in a lively tradition, with many prodigies and a substantial audience. Today’s popularity is expressed in *productive*<sup>44</sup> as well as *receptive* aspects of performance: there are parents willing to expose their children to a large audience, children cooperative and able to perform on a high level, a substantial amount of viewers for prodigy videos, and attention from other (traditional or “official”) media channels including newspapers and television. Where a leading newspaper at the time counted an average of four prodigy concerts a year in German-speaking Europe during the first half of the nineteenth

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<sup>40</sup> 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 [. . .].’

<sup>41</sup> User names (e.g. Paddler16, Akabubu2002) are used when real names are not explicitly given in the video title, description or content. See also footnote 14, above.

<sup>42</sup> The far-right colon in table 3 gives the number of *non*-responding viewers per 1000 views. The results confirm findings of earlier studies on this point (Burgess and Green 2009; Cheng et al. 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Emily Bear’s video could not be considered in this part of the survey, because it has disabled the feature that allows users to leave a comments.

<sup>44</sup> As pointed out above in section 2.3 of this chapter, I use the terms *productive* and *receptive* without the exclusionary status that is often attributed to them in the communication models from which they derive.

century, this modest survey on YouTube reveals a similar number of convincing prodigies over a period of only five years.<sup>45</sup> Whereas the nineteenth-century concert visitor was (in theory) a German-speaking member of the upcoming educated elite and middle class in Western Europe, prodigy audiences in 2013 are dominated by English-speaking online media consumers. User comments and meta-data further show a variety of geographical, cultural and musical backgrounds. Most interestingly, a large number of engaged listener-viewers (who leave a comment) turn out to be practicing amateur musicians. We may assume that audiences in the past were often practicing dilettante or professional musicians as well.

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 plain registration, or as part of a TV broadcast or documentary. The literal phrase “next Mozart” and other references to the Mozart figure have remained a common way to praise, identify and assess musical prodigies. The following comment is exemplary.

R u kidding me! Mozart re-born..amazing talent..wondering what kind of training this kid went thru..simply gifted! (Ezam Shah, comment on Tsung)<sup>46</sup>

Where investigations previously drew from concert programs, newspapers, private and scholarly writing, the present exploration turns to video data (content, titles, description) and user comments from YouTube archives. The following comments on Tiffany Koo’s video<sup>47</sup> show how users jump in to correct “inappropriate” references to the name.<sup>48</sup>

I agree that this doesn't seem like "natural talent", but I know for sure, she has worked really hard on this and deserves some commendation. I don't think you can compare her to Mozart though, who was a genius who came from a genius family and was born with this genius talent. Well done Tiffany though! (Robert Leeha, comment on Koo)

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<sup>45</sup> Admittedly, the study is not as systematic and exhaustive in one medium as Kopiez’ (2011) study, which tracks all prodigy reports in one newspaper over a set period. The structure and user experience of the online platform make such a systematic less obvious and difficult. But most of all, the research question of this study demands a qualitative, experience-oriented approach.

<sup>46</sup> Editorial note: Besides minor corrections in punctuation and lay-out, comments are exactly cited from the source. Informal vocabulary, unusual spelling and capitalization are characteristic to the discourse of online and social media. The parenthetical reference states the commenter’s full username and prodigy (family or user) name. For video source details, see appendix A, table 1.

<sup>47</sup> For video source details, see appendix A, table 1.

<sup>48</sup> The original comment by Meguio Laoshir on which these comments offer a reply, was no longer available at the date of retrieval (May 26, 2013).

Of course you cannot compare her to Mozart! He was a composer! The thing that people confuse master classical pianists with legendary composers is that they both played really well, but there is an utter difference that many keep missing! And it is the surreal ability to compose those masterpieces that the current pianists are playing! So the two are not only dissimilar, but also not comparable! (Anthony Lighterness, comment on Koo)

Clearly, the Mozart figure remains a familiar point of reference. While controversy may arise as to whether the label is suited for a particular prodigy, a wide consensus remains on the (“sticky”<sup>49</sup>) associations with genius, the legendary composer and masterpieces.

Despite the different aim and method, it is worthwhile to compare findings with the historiographic study of Kopiez (2011), discussed earlier. Firstly, the piano remains a popular instrument among prodigies today. Composition and improvisation are far less common than “reproductive” performance in the classical tradition. In the instances that these privileged creative skills appear, they are typically highlighted in explicit reference to Mozart (e.g. in the case of Alma Deutscher and Emily Bear). Another point of correspondence to historical concert announcements appears in video titles: age remains a defining and distinctive quality of prodigies. The age range remains similar, with the youngest prodigies performing in public at the age of three. Furthermore, the data confirm the trend of increasing complexity of the performed repertoire among piano prodigies (Kopiez 2011, 233). The older prodigies master full-length recital repertoire on a very high technical and expressive level. Repertoire is usually restricted to standard works of the classical Canon: Mozart, Bach, and Chopin are obvious choices. The grade classification system is a new ‘objective’ measure of complexity that even appears in some video titles as an apparent measure of exceptionality.

On one point, the survey results diverge from Kopiez’s findings. It concerns the “blossoming time” of prodigies, which appears to lie at a much younger age. Paddler16, to give a concrete example, has continued to upload videos on a regular basis since 2007, but later videos (showing the Japanese girl up until her current age of nine years old) do not nearly approach the multiple millions of views that mark her most popular performances at age five and three. The same seems to hold true for prodigies of whom multiple videos can be found: their videos at the youngest age are the most popular.<sup>50</sup> Although not yet performing at

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<sup>49</sup> A term I borrow from Robin James (2013), to be discussed in the upcoming section. Cf. Hays (1994); Ahmed (1998).

<sup>50</sup> It does not appear likely that this popularity of early-childhood videos simply results from the longer period over which these videos have been online. The data in appendix A shows that in general, the age of a

the level of an adult professional, the promise itself apparently provides enough entertainment. It may be concluded that 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 can be found. For example, negative responses still focus on suspected abuse, parental pressure, commercial interest or excessive, involuntary practice. Consider the following four comments.

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; my 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 2003a, 52; my translation)

The first three comments were found online; the fourth was scribbled on the back of a program booklet by an unknown visitor of a prodigy concert that took place in 1904. In a remarkably similar tone, each of them expresses concern for the child's well-being, fed by an unconcealed claim about involuntary and excessive (even totalitarian) subordination to practice. The fourth comment refers to the promise of exceptional achievement in adulthood discussed earlier. Furthermore, the third comment suggests a link between abuse and a specific nation that will gain weight in the later discussion of “Asianness.” For now, the comments serve to illustrate the difficulty—and by extent, the common refusal—to consider the very possibility that these prodigies may in fact enjoy what they are doing; that prodigious performance may be compatible with a “normal,” free, and worriless childhood. These audience members may have pondered, to quote user MrSimeon76, ‘great...but that's in exchange for a normal childhood... There's something not right about this...’ (comment on Garrett 2009).<sup>51</sup> A further discussion of the tension between the prodigy phenomenon and the (Western) concept of childhood takes place in chapter three.

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video does not have any systematic impact on the amount of viewers. That would mean that older videos have a systematically higher number of views.

<sup>51</sup> For more examples of this kind, see appendix B.

So, what constitutes a “successful” prodigy in the present? What defines a ‘prodigy of all prodigies’ (George 0:10-0:15)—to quote Gavin George’s piano teacher, Maria Craig Powel—in 2013? It may be expected that views on prodigious performance, quality and success have radically changed since Mozart’s time. However, 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 (royal, presidential) remains a privilege that confirms the exceptionality and realness of a prodigy. A successful prodigy, both in 1800 and 2013, is often depicted 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) have kept their legitimacy in the present.

It could be argued that the corporate media, as they appear on YouTube, provide further legitimacy to prodigies, at least from a mainstream consumer audience point of view. In a similar way the non-profit 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 testify 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 *circa* 1800, today’s equivalent may be an invitation to perform by American talk show host Ellen Degeneres. Numerous exceptional individuals have shown their talents on *The Ellen Show* over the past years, including four of the twenty-three prodigies selected for this survey (Emily Bear, Umi Garrett, Tsung Tsung, Ethan Borthnick).

Beside aspects that confirm a continuation of the prodigy tradition, the survey reveals a number of new or previously unnoticed trends. A first point that deserves elaboration is the previously unheard (or non-existent) voice of a wider audience, that is, an audience beyond experts and relatives. Among audience responses of the past, it was relatively simple to separate the “subjective” voices of direct family members and an occasional enthusiastic admirer from the expert critic’s or scientist’s “objective” judgment. Ticket sales and announcements of prodigy concerts, by contrast, are the only traces that reveal the presence of a larger group as audience. The wider audience to which I refer is everything but a homogeneous group, but in the present survey they share at least the skills and material access to the online YouTube platform. Traces of their voice may be found in written comments that exceed or depart from the familiar discourses of the past. I propose to consider two themes which stand out in this regard. For the sake of clarity, let me characterize them as a

respectively subjective self-reflective mode and an objectifying mode of response. The first kind includes an overwhelming amount of comments in which users reflect on their own practice as amateurs musicians. The second concerns comments which utilize the label of “Asianness.”

To elaborate briefly on the first, reflective mode, users often express their amazement in a direct comparison to their own skills: ‘I’ve been trying this etude for 30 years and still can’t get through the first two pages’ (Bthadani, comment on Garrett).<sup>52</sup> Comments of this kind are unanimously positive. Together with more general expressions of praise, they appear throughout all prodigy videos irrespective of age, genre, performance setting, musical expertise, and country of residence. As an undeniable voice in the “wider audience,” it is significant to learn that these practicing amateur musicians are impressed by prodigies. Most importantly, it shows how prodigies affect what these practitioners think of *their own playing*. This point inspires a new conception of prodigious creativity on which I elaborate towards the end of this chapter.

It is worth noting that the quality of the musical performance is a rarely discussed theme in user comments.<sup>53</sup> Conventional and specialist language, such as references to technical fluency, quality of tone, expression, or interpretation, are almost or completely absent. Prodigy performance almost appears to be a one-dimensional achievement that is either successful or unsuccessful, without further nuance. The only aspect that returns more frequently concerns the title of the performed piece. Particularly when a piece is known as part of the “grade” system in piano repertoire, it provides some sort of “objective” referent. This may be explained by the fact that the non-expert audience does not have the vocabulary to describe the performance in qualitative terms. However, many comments reveal at least some level of musical education, which works against such a conclusion. One would expect more engagement with musical details. The absence of specialist discourse may have other reasons. Perhaps the musical terms are simply not very suitable to capture the compelling experience of a prodigy performance, not even to someone who masters the vocabulary.

To return to the cross-historical comparison of prodigy cultures, a second point to consider is technology. The online environment undeniably leaves a mark on prodigy performances and prodigy experiences of the present. I already touched on the “suggested videos” lists and the “small-world” phenomenon, which guides viewers from one video to

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<sup>52</sup> For more examples, see appendix B.

<sup>53</sup> A few exceptions are cited in appendix B.



another. These features of YouTube's technological design 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 (appendix A, table 3) further support this idea. In great contrast to the yearly amount of prodigy concerts in the early nineteenth century, thus, it can be expected that audiences have seen many prodigies before. This has a major effect on a prodigy's capacity to amaze: It allows for direct comparison (and competition) between prodigies.

A next point to consider is YouTube's accessibility.<sup>54</sup> Nowadays, it is possible to launch a prodigy career from the private sphere of the living room. This is what happened to Tsung Tsung. He was invited to perform on *The Ellen Show*<sup>55</sup> after his home-recorded video<sup>56</sup> went "viral" some months earlier. Beside his incredible skills on the piano, the home video shows many signs of a worrisless, "authentic" childhood: a very relaxed and spontaneous child, engaging in a playful game with his father.<sup>57</sup> This image contradicts any suspicion of abuse or involuntary practice and may have contributed to the widespread embrace by Western media. His clearly more uptight and orchestrated performance on the American talkshow, however, justifies a second thought on his pleasure in the prodigious lifestyle.<sup>58</sup>

A further element that shapes present prodigy performances, related to navigation and technology, is YouTube's archival function. The archive not only produces a space for verification<sup>59</sup> and comparison, it also enables access to various performances of a single prodigy, giving insight in the ongoing musical development over several years. An answer to the classically future-oriented question: "What will become of this three-year-old?" has

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<sup>54</sup> I do not subscribe to the utopian view that YouTube is a democratic and egalitarian platform. Nonetheless, the accessible technology produces enables new forms of communication (and performance) which were not available before. Cf. Trend (2001) on the "Digital Divide."

<sup>55</sup> <http://youtu.be/6dLkyJJ4x3s> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>56</sup> This video is included in the survey. See appendix A.

<sup>57</sup> For a full transcript and translation of this conversation, see appendix C.

<sup>58</sup> The Huffington Post (November 8, 2012) reports 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](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/08/tsung-tsung-5-year-old-pianist_n_2089942.html) (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>59</sup> The following remark made by user Jfiamjjsond231 testifies that this happens: 'You should watch her other videos if you think it's fake' (comment on Paddler16).

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, nowadays. Curiosity about the fulfillment of a prodigy's future promise makes biographic channels<sup>60</sup> a most compelling resource to explore.

For example, when first confronted with the most popular video of then five year old Paddler16, it takes little effort to find out that a steady musical development has followed. 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 or successful competition participation has been found. It must be noted that the search for information about this prodigy was severely limited by the fact that she does not show her full name. One wonders whether she, or her parents, *really* wants to be world famous, because, if so, why does she (or her family) use a pseudonym? Also, why do her parents not undertake more efforts to promote her talent through other (online and offline) media channels? There seem to be no performances beyond her home town, no competitions, no attention from official media. Reasons for this could be manifold: modesty, naivety, protection, or lack of opportunity. Perhaps she is more exceptional on YouTube than among her piano classmates? I suspect that Feldman and other prodigy scholars would tend to classify this Japanese girl as a precocious amateur practitioner with slightly overly ambitious parents, rather than a musical prodigy in the strict sense. Another possibility is that the now-nine-year-old is much more self-determined than we assume, and that she has already taken over the practice of archiving her own performances. She might not yet have a clue how to reach and give content to this "world-wide" fame, but is determined to show as much as possible on that first and most accessible stage of the World Wide Web.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Every user has a personal channel, but only few use it to systematically collect performances of (and on behalf of) a single prodigy. Four prodigies have a biographic channel of this kind: Alma Deutscher, Paddler16, Umi Garret, and Tiffany Koo. Although parents seem to have an initiating role in those channels and user names, it should not be overlooked that that, say, a seven-year-old prodigy, born in the twenty-first century, is quite likely to know his or her way around on YouTube.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Famous cases of YouTube home videos leading to worldwide fame such as Justin Bieber. Bieber's manager utilized the sympathy for grass-root discoveries and authentic, self-taught musicians by encouraging him to upload more non-professional standards during several months before the actual commercial launch of his career. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin\\_Bieber](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin_Bieber) (accessed May 26, 2013)

## 2.6 Asianness

This section sets out to consider *Asianness*, which, like the Mozart figure, can be understood as the assemblage of connotations and traits attached to the term Asian. A provisional framework for the relation between Asianness and creativity is provided by philosopher of music, Robin James (2013). Her account of the relation between race and aesthetics holds that race (alongside gender and sexuality) bears a historical and even explicitly *causal* relation to key concepts of philosophical aesthetics. Concepts of “genius”, “high” versus “low” culture, and, above all, “taste” and “beauty” take part in ‘constructing and naturalizing systems of privilege and oppression’ (109). James claims that ‘[the] apparent neutrality [of aesthetics] is actually evidence of its centering of whiteness and heteromascularity’ (111). The hierarchy of privilege is not based on a fixed set of features, but rather on a consistent gendering of the higher-valued as “masculine,” and the lower-valued as “feminine.”<sup>62</sup> The value attached to the feminized traits, James argues, depends on the very physical body in which they appear.<sup>63</sup> I take this as a starting point to define the phenomenon and figure of Asianness: a contingent assemblage that takes part in shaping and gendering actual bodies, lives, and physical realities.

‘Asians.’ This short comment on Paddler16’s video is exemplary. Comments related to Asianness are often bold and simple. They suggest a self-evident meaning. In the case cited, the consensus shows in a confirmation of no less than forty “likes.”<sup>64</sup> What exactly is this content on which everyone seems to agree? Is it always a negative connotation that confirms the privilege of the white, masculine body, as James implies? I touched earlier on the suggestions of physical abuse, excessive and involuntary training, exploitation and the perceived absence of a “normal” childhood in comments. Although not confined to this particular group of videos, all comments cited happen to derive from videos of Asian

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Silverman and Miller (2009), discussed in chapter one.

<sup>63</sup> Drawing on the work of Christine Battersby and Robert Gooding-Williams respectively, James elaborates, ‘stereotypically feminized, “blackened” or otherwise racially exoticized traits are valued when they appear in white, male bodies (as evidence of their ability to experience complex affects like sublimity), but devalued when they appear in non-white, non-male bodies (as evidence of their inability to rise above mere beauty, ugliness, or other simple affect)’ (James 2013, 111). Note the proximity to Kivy (1967) and the role of childlike, feminized traits in aesthetic discourses on Mozart-like genius, discussed in chapter one.

<sup>64</sup> This response makes the comment into a “top comment,” listed separately above all other comments. Individual comments can be rated through likes and dislikes just like videos. Top comments are comments that have received the highest number of “likes.” This is a less common practice than rating videos. With forty likes, the comment cited received the highest amount of likes of all comments on this particular video.

prodigies (as testified by name, physical appearance, language, and alphabet). The negative message carries extra weight in these videos. In an assemblage of Asianness, I argue, the suggestions of abuse reinforce the notion of a gap between the liberal-democratic, “civilized” West, and a totalitarian, Asian other (or rather, an *East-Asian*<sup>65</sup> other).

However, the discourse on Asianness is not exclusively negative. Some audience members are convinced that there is at least a certain core of authenticity, some degree of voluntary engagement in the prodigy performance. They draw this conclusion based on what they hear, see or what they already know from experience. The following comments exemplify the stance.

No child would ever play so beautifully as this by being beaten. She obviously loves her music, as is obvious by her wonderful musicality. (Terry Holton, comment on Akabubu2002)

[ ... ] Okay, maybe she does have Tiger parents, but we'll never know. It's just become the norm for Asian kids to play an instrument (or more), and some of them are just following the group. But you have to understand many of these kids do love music, and want to try their best, not because of parents. My parents never "forced" me to play piano, and look where I am now, a scholarship holder in a conservatoire and I never get tired of piano—sometimes my parents oppose to me playing piano! (Robert Leeha, comment on Koo)<sup>66</sup>

Robert Leeha, author of the second comment cited, jumps in to defend the Asian qualities against the critics and skeptics. While accusing the pessimists of a racist view, even the more nuanced responses seem to agree that there is a fundamental link between “being Asian” and extremely disciplined practice. He continues to address the phenomenon of Asianness in another comment on the same video:

I am actually so sick of Asian stereotyping, it's not even funny. People who criticize Asians are more than likely people who have some sort of *jealousy* towards them and their achievements. It's naturally part of Asian culture to do what you can to your best.. I'm sure there's nothing wrong with that. They achieve highly not because they are Asian, but simply because they

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<sup>65</sup> The boundary between Asian and non-Asian prodigies seems to be clear and definitive even though the geographical location of “Asian culture” is far from evident. If Asia refers to geographical location, it primarily concerns *south-east* Asia. If approached through the statements of *English-speaking* individuals, however, it may be better understood as a debate between Asian and “white” US citizens. It is further surprising that prodigies of Russian and Caucasian descent seem little affected by the notion of Asianness, even though Russia is known among musicians (speaking from experience) for producing fanatic, high level and musicians, and for tough pedagogies.

<sup>66</sup> “Tiger parents” refers to Chua (2011).

work hard. There are plenty of Asian-haters who seem to think achievements only come to those who are born naturally to achieve. (Robert Leeha, comment on Koo; my emphasis)

Aware and discontent with the negative effects of stereotype, Leeha praises rather than condemns the link between Asians and discipline. Rather than questioning the very legitimacy of the link, he shifts the emphasis from Asianness as inborn nature to Asianness as *culture*. The stereotypical traits lie at the “natural” (which implies a stable and unchangeable) core of Asian culture.<sup>67</sup> Jealousy may indeed be a ground for many comments on Asianness. Some users openly admit:

Geez, why couldn't I have been born an ultra-talented Asian kid? Great work! (FearsBecomePhobias, comment on Garrett)

I wish my parents had forced me :P (Piano0b, comment on Akabubu2002)

The first seems more sincere, the second may or may not be read in a sarcastic or humorous tone, while hinting at involuntary practice. The first refers to inborn nature, the second to nurture. Yet, both comments draw on a subjective and self-reflective mode of expression. Moreover, they presuppose the relevance of a connection between prodigy and Asianness. Neither questions the impact of being Asian on being a prodigy. Similar terms appear in the case of non-Asian prodigies, but with very different implications. To cite just a few:

He's not Asian? (Robert Clemenson, comment on Ehrenfriend)

And he's not even Asian... (Asd owe, comment on George)

BEST 7 YEARS OLD VIOLINIST AND IT'S NOT ASIAN! 0\_0 :0 (NEXIfilms, comment on Kahane)

I know! She not Asian!!! She blonde! Finally! A blonde prodigy! (Darcy Fryer, comment on Kahane)

These expressions of surprise reveal what may be the most important effect of Asianness on creativity in prodigy performances: non-Asian prodigies have a privileged position when it comes to the capacity to amaze.<sup>68</sup> Nobody seems to doubt whether or not a prodigy

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. the nature and nurture positions in prodigy research, discussed in chapter one.

<sup>68</sup> Moreover, these comments affirm the coherency of the musical prodigy niche. They show that commenting viewers are aware of the context of other prodigy videos, their similarities and differences.

appropriately fits the label “Asian” or not.<sup>69</sup> A final citation from the video of Richard Hoffmann is relevant and exceptional in this regard. In contrast to his Western name, the video documentary soon reveals his Chinese background as soon as his mother appears in view.<sup>70</sup> Many comment on the confusion, often leading to a conclusion that devalues the prodigy’s exceptionality.

I was impressed to see a 3 years old European child be a piano prodigy. But when I saw the Chinese mother [ ... ] I understood and watched a cat video. (Gla950, comment on Hoffman)

This is one of the many comments that express disappointment about the belated discovery of Richard’s Asian upbringing. It shows how the label of Asianness functions as an explanation for and demystification of exceptional performance. When a prodigy turns out to be Asian, there is nothing to be impressed about.<sup>71</sup> This is an important point, because it shows how the label of Asianness can work against the capacity to amaze, the primary aspect of prodigious creativity.

Arun Saldanha (2004) has conceptualized race, against the trend of critical theories that emphasize the cultural-discursive construction, as an ontological machinery that includes important physical (i.e. genetical, phenotypical<sup>72</sup>) traits alongside cultural, discursive and ideological forces.<sup>73</sup> Constituent components of race include ‘strands of DNA, phenotypical variation, discursive practices (law, media, science), artifacts such as clothes and food, and the distribution of wealth’ (19). This perspective becomes relevant to Asianness and prodigies through its emphasis on the visual element: ‘within a racialized regime of vision, phenotype does always matter somehow—to experience, imagination, and belonging, to interaction and the allocation of bodies’ (11). The categorical distinction between Asian and non-Asian

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. the often heated debates in daily speech over the justified use of the “prodigy” label.

<sup>70</sup> Richard’s mother is not only his dedicated piano teacher, she clearly takes advantage of the media interest in her son to pitch her original “Rainbow” method, a color-based piano method which, she suggests, lies at the core of her son prodigious achievement.

<sup>71</sup> Besides, the comment illustrates how prodigy videos compete with various other genres of general entertainment. “Cat videos” are another highly popular niches on YouTube.

<sup>72</sup> Phenotype is ‘the sum total of the observable characteristics of an individual, regarded as the consequence of the interaction of the individual’s genotype with the environment’ (OED online, accessed May 26, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> Saldanha’s “re-ontologization” of race circumscribes the risk of essentialism by deploying a dynamic (or, to use his terminology, a “viscous”) approach to ontology that closely aligns with new materialist theories outlined in the introduction of this thesis.

prodigies, epitomized in the stir over Richard Hoffman, can thus be understood as a materialization of race, an allocation of bodies in which phenotype matters.

Saldanha emphasize ontology and the physical roots of race not to essentialize and solidify the gap, but to rework the very suggestion of a fixed origin.

[Race should be] conceived as a chain of contingency, in which the connections between its constituent components are not given, but are made viscous through local attractions. Whiteness, for example, is about the sticky connections between property, privilege, and a paler skin. There is no essence of whiteness, but there is a relative fixity that inheres in all the “local pulls” of its many elements in flux. (18)

The immanent machinery of race has material consequences, even when differing across individual cases. Asianness in prodigy videos invokes “sticky” connections to hard work, involuntary practice and even physical abuse. Asianness decreases the *capacity to amaze* of those that fit the label, by providing an element of explanatory value. Their non-Asian, white peers, by contrast, benefit from the distinction. The absence of an Asian “cause” heightens the sensation. It results in a negative qualification of the non-Western other and reduces the very possibility of being perceived as creative, as exceptional, and prodigious.

## **2.7 Popularity, Audience, Consumers**

Viewing rates, as noted earlier, are among the criteria that have been used to select videos for this survey. A high number of views can be understood as a confirmation of prodigiousness, if we follow the value attributed to publicity and fame in prodigy research (Stevens 1982; Feldman 1994b; Ruthsatz and Urbach 2012, 420). This section asks how these numbers, and related issues of popularity, inform us about the ways in which prodigies are creative. Following the working definition of prodigious creativity, viewing rates offer a rudimentary, quantitative trace of prodigies’ capacity to attract, engage and amaze an audience. As shown in appendix B, all except two videos reached over fifty thousand views. Half of the sample, that is twelve videos, reached over a million views, four up to ten million, and two over twenty-four million views. How do we understand the fact that some videos attract a larger audience than others? Is it useful to interpret viewings rates and popularity as a measure of creativity, and by extend of exceptionality?

A classification of “average” and “exceptional” prodigies is hard to give on the basis of these viewing rates. The two top videos, reaching over twenty-four million views, are of the

nine-year-old Malaki Paul and six-year-old Emily Bear.<sup>74</sup> The first evokes goose bumps with a heartbreaking rendition of Beyoncé's 'Listen' on Britain's Got Talent in 2012. The singer breaks into tears out of stage fright halfway his first attempt, but makes a startling return on his second try. The second has attracted viewers over a longer period since 2008 with a documentary/news item on Emily Bear, announced as 'the Next Mozart.'<sup>75</sup> In third place is Thehypnoguy1's 'North Korean children playing Guitar. Creepy as hell,' which stands out as the only ensemble performance in the survey.<sup>76</sup> Other top videos include those of three-year-olds Akim Camera on violin (with Andre Rieu) and the conducting Jonathan Okseniuk in his living room. The fact that the top videos are produced by commercial TV stations may have contributed, but offer no guarantee for high viewing rates. Conversely, it is remarkable to see that nonprofessional home recordings compete at the highest level with professional media productions. Viewings do not seem to be specifically affected by setting, country, expertise, repertoire, or gender.

Although many will share the view that a prodigy does not exist without an audience, it is far less evident that audience size offers insight in creativity. By contrast, it is often argued that mass appeal and popularity, going hand in hand with profit and consumerism, work *against* the freedom and state of mind required for aesthetic creativity. This idea not only returns in traditional views on aesthetics (e.g. "high" versus "low" art; Adorno's view on popular music), but also persists in contemporary critical and feminist perspectives. Feminist musicologist Sally Macarthur (2010), for example, addresses the relation between capital flow and innovation in "new" music in the third chapter of her monograph that outlines a feminist-Deleuzian musicology of the twenty-first century.

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<sup>74</sup> It is worth exploring the average viewing rates in the neighboring "niche" of TV talent shows, where different scales of audience size may be the norm. The existence of differing scales across genres is confirmed by user 1plus11000's comment on the relatively little amount likes for Alma Deutscher: '[...] how is it possible that this young girl get only 100K+ Like while Lady Gaga get 1,000K+?' (appendix B). The talent show genre unlocks a massive archive of audition fragments of aspiring instrumentalists and singers of various ages and levels. It could be argued that these videos call into question the very definition of prodigy and the distinctiveness of *exceptional* (as opposed to average) performance.

<sup>75</sup> This video has been briefly noted before, but it should not be confused with the much shorter and more schematic ABC News item on Alma Deutscher, transcribed and discussed in chapter one.

<sup>76</sup> Among the five child guitarists, one girl stands out through extra solos and leading melody. In search for her name and background I encountered the video Kang Eunju that has also been included in the survey. However, at this moment I am unable to confirm that the two videos show the same girl. The issue makes clear why stricter criteria would not have been of use: the first video is relevant because it went viral on social media last year and yet it deviates through and ensemble performance; the second performance fits the framework better, offers leads to background information but did not reach a similar audience.



Macarthur's diagnosis is ruthless: 'A system focused on money as the primary value potentially gives prominence to composers whose music lacks innovation' (18). Worse even, 'the emphasis on monetary flow disables creativity' (ibid.).<sup>77</sup> In contrast to the (non-feminist) aesthetics that ultimately privileges the solitary, Beethoven-like genius, capital flow for Macarthur is not just about money, but about the flows of all kinds of value, material and immaterial. That is, state-funded and institution-trained composers who see their work as non-commercial or "art for art's sake" are just as much affected by this system. Macarthur argues that "new" music 'maintains and repeats aesthetically what has already been expressed' (83) through its double investment in neo-romantic master-narratives on the one hand and economic dependency on capitalist funding politics on the other. At the same time, languages of excellence, commercialism, capitalism, and the rhetoric of the "music itself" package an image modeled on autonomous, individual masculinity in terms of neutrality. This process supports the illusion that one can experience value-free music outside of social constraints. Promoting exceptional female composers, then, feeds into the capitalist discourse and does not distort the continuity of this system.

In response to this problem, Macarthur conceptualizes transformational creativity along the lines of feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's (1994) politico-theoretical figure of the "activist nomad." Without going into detail, it is worth to consider Macarthur's appropriation, as she elaborates: 'neither specifically reserved for women, nor dependent on a binary opposition to the norm, the "becoming-other" of "new" music entails moving away from the distinctiveness of the music towards something else' (Macarthur 2010, 86). This view offers possibilities for underrepresented categories of being to take part in the production of difference: woman composers, child composers.

Yet, is Macarthur right to suggest that the link between composition and capitalism is a relatively recent phenomenon, a symptom of advanced capitalism? The view appears to be inspired by the contrast of grassroots and cross-over initiatives against the practice of composers who made a comfortable living through generous state funding for the arts in the second half of the twentieth century. The latter group clearly had a less obvious stake in commercialism. Nonetheless, musical production and economic forces have always been closely connected. In eighteenth and nineteenth-century practices, money and economic

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<sup>77</sup> In an argument on the relevance of theorizing "feminist futures," Braidotti (2009) presents the same view: 'Being nothing more than this all-consuming entropic energy, advanced capitalism lacks the ability to create anything new: it can merely promote the recycling of spent hopes and repackaged longings' (3).

survival were an undeniable part in musical production, even in the production of the works of the Great Masters. From weekly allowances up to the benefit of being born in a socio-economic class that supports (or prescribes) music as a profession, the challenge of simply making a living has always existed (Applegate 1998). Macarthur's diagnosis of capitalism as a recent phenomenon, while serving her specific inquiry into the teleological end of musical development (the genre of "new" music), is not helpful in the domains of prodigies and "mere performers."

If it is true that money inhibits creativity on a structural level, it makes more sense to turn attention towards the least popular videos of the survey. Lowest in the ranking with a mere eight thousand view stands Nuron Mukumi, whose video I found not in a random browsing session but through a specific context of events discussed at the outset of this chapter. What may be "wrong" with this prodigy performance? Why has it not succeeded thus far to attract similar amounts of views? Perhaps this video is better understood as a record stored for private purposes than a deliberate attempt to reach a public of millions. But as part of the survey, it offers the opportunity to assess creativity in a domain where audience size appears unaffected by "viral" internet hypes, profit-oriented management and media attention.

Rather than audience size, it was the delivery of a *convincing musical performance* that justifies the inclusion of this video in the survey. My conviction was surely fed by the opportunity to meet Nuron Mukumi in real life, through which I learned about his ongoing development as an aging prodigy (he was fourteen at the time), and his current success beyond the actual video. But these circumstances do not diminish the role of the audiovisual, expressive and musical character in his piano playing and conducting. The next chapter will offer theoretical support for the thesis that prodigious creativity, here, consists of a specific combination of gesture, physical appearance and certain pervasive ideas about adult authenticity, childhood and "human" expressiveness.

Mark Ehrenfried's video stands out not through a small audience but through an unusual amount of negative ratings.<sup>78</sup> Users widely comment on this, calling him 'fake,' 'a performing monkey' and noting that it seems to be 'playback.' Is this a real prodigy? What causes the controversy? Two aspects deserve mentioning. First of all, the performance setting is unusual: not a black Steinway but a cartoon-style colored grand piano, disco lights and montage in the style of a video clip. It looks like a concert or a performance for TV, but there is no audience

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<sup>78</sup> While other videos receive well over 90 "likes" per 100 ratings (the sum of likes and dislikes), this one does not reach beyond 70 (appendix A, table 3).

visible. On the left a few other musicians appear for a second. Most likely the shown musicians are playing along with a pre-recorded audio track. Possibly, the piano part that we hear is nonetheless played and recorded live during the shoot. Secondly, Mark does not play standard classical repertoire in an acoustic setting, but a piece called ‘Rhapsody in Rock’ by Brabham (as stated in the video description). The flashy staging comes closer to a pop star image akin to Justin Bieber than the “serious” classical virtuoso which appears in many other videos. One user remarks:

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—like a real pop star—into the camera. Perhaps it was playback after all. But a short browsing session through other videos by Mark nonetheless confirms the idea that he is prodigy like many others: performing at public concerts, receiving media attention, having success at competitions and even releasing a CD album before the age of ten.<sup>79</sup> In the end, it may have been the flashy, commercial ‘packaging’ of the prodigy performance that has triggered so many negative responses.

There is a sense in which all prodigies’ videos and their audiences can be accused of commercialism: the encounters are facilitated by a platform that is owned by a profit-oriented company. Does that structurally impair the possibility of creativity for all prodigies that we have seen? In a sense, it does. Because YouTube has become a normative stage, all prodigies taking part are reiterating the norm rather than pushing its boundaries. They contribute to the Google Enterprise, and to the increasingly prominent role that media technology plays in people’s daily lives. At the same time, boundaries may be rewritten and creativity may be found on other levels.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See <http://www.markehrenfried.de/biographie.html> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>80</sup> It is worth noting that Feldman and Morelock’s (1999) describe their intermediate mode of creativity as a kind of “working class” creativity: ‘Middle C refers to the middle levels of creative work, as represented by the commercial artist or the accomplished artist whose works are commissioned and purchased for display in fine hotels, offices, and banks.’ (454). Goldsmith (1999), by contrast, suggests that the decision to perform *within* rather than at the edge or outside of an existing domain may be motivated by economic needs: ‘Without an understanding of the canons of performance and communication established by the field and without some level

## 2.8 Prodigious Creativity

In this chapter, I have explored creativity in terms of a prodigy's capacity to amaze, with a primary focus on prodigy performance in the present and on audience response. I have suggested that prodigious creativity can be found in newly emerging or previously unnoticed aspects shared by prodigies in the present. In a comparison with the historical sources, Asianness and self-reflective comments turn up as new or previously unnoticed themes in audience responses. A further discussion of viewing rates and popularity has complicated the question of prodigious creativity: if prodigies are defined by their audience and popularity, and creativity and capitalism are conflicting forces, then the most popular prodigies may be the least creative. And yet, it may be said that precisely these prodigies display their capacity to amaze and engage an audience of millions. The latter proposition is not easy to maintain. It easily reduces creativity into productivity: any perceivable event or experience may then be called creative.<sup>81</sup> At the same time, it must be kept in mind that even the least popular prodigies take part in the capitalist system, not the least through the enterprise that owns the video website. The wider flows of online media, in which some videos go "viral" and others do not, has not been addressed in its entire complexity, but it is clear that social, corporate, individual, and even historical forces, all have a part in co-determining prodigies' capacity to amaze.

While the new perspective is useful as a way to address newly emerging trends in current prodigy performances, it does not replace or overwrite older meanings. In particular, the image of domain-transforming intentional creativity that originates in the solitary human mind remains active. Has it been useful to approach prodigious creativity in terms of the capacity to amaze? In a sense, it leads to the point where *all* prodigies are creative, because they differ not only from markers of average performance, but are also always different from all other prodigies (which makes them Mozart-like).<sup>82</sup> The distinction between continuity and disruption, between repetition and difference, or sameness and novelty is not clear-cut. Rankings and boundaries depend on the specific position and context of observation.

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of support from colleagues or powerful players in the field, it is difficult to *make a living* practicing one's craft' (110; my emphasis).

<sup>81</sup> The apparent relativism may further serve cultural critique: economic value and cultural value are not the same, but neither can escape the conditions of mere economic survival. A discussion of Pierre Bourdieu's work on these important issues could not be included in this thesis.

<sup>82</sup> This is the kind of creativity that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) denote in their concept of the "line of flight."

Continuity, or prodigious *identity*, cannot accurately be opposed to creativity. Both prodigy and creativity refer to acts of making a difference, to a movement away from norms. Nonetheless, they depend on these very norms—some call it a domain—in order to be perceivable.

A brief return to the persistent notion of Mozart-like creativity (composition and improvisation) is needed to address another aspect that leaves a distinct mark on prodigies' capacity to amaze. If the most exceptional prodigies were to be selected on the basis of the traditional privilege of specific creative capacities, the honor would go to Emily Bear and Alma Deutscher.<sup>83</sup> On the basis of their talent in composition and improvisation, it is quite likely that prodigy scholars such as Feldman, Howe and Winner would identify them the most creative, and therefore exceptional, prodigies. Compared to the other twenty-one prodigies in the survey, they stand out through skills that exceed the “reproductive” performance of existing works on a professional level. Is it significant that these creative prodigies are both girls? Not only are they girls, but they are white, share an upper/middleclass family background, are native English-speakers, and show an extroverted (rather than introverted) personality. Their parents are not afraid of media attention, but make a clear effort to underline the “natural” childness of their daughters: they play and have fun like every other child when not immersed in their expert activity. The image of modest, humble, and supportive parents returns in the documentary-style videos of the (white) boy prodigies Gavin George and Ethan Borthnick. These videos, however, place far less or no emphasis at all on the creative dimension of talent.<sup>84</sup> This is despite the fact that Gavin George's mother has a degree in giftedness studies (as we learn from the video), which suggests she would have noticed and stimulated improvisatory play if it manifested.

How can we explain the relative emphasis on creative skills in girl prodigies? Silverman and Miller reported that the most extreme scores in intelligence tests (an IQ beyond 200) are often women (Silverman and Miller 2009). If we maintain the privilege of Mozart-like creativity, and if we follow Gardner's (1999) theory of multiple intelligences, Emily Bear and Alma Deutscher continue the trend of exceptional women intellectual achievers in the field

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<sup>83</sup> The most popular video of Alma Deutscher happens to be a violin concerto without signs of composition or improvisation. In chapter one, however, I have discussed the skills for which she is more widely known: composition and improvisation. The repertoire list in appendix A, table 2, further reveals that there other composing prodigies in the survey, whose talents remain to be addressed elsewhere.

<sup>84</sup> The description of Ethan Borthnick's video states that ‘he can play up to 200 melodies from memory and has composed over twenty pieces.’ The documentary, however, does not go dwell on the compositional talent.

musical giftedness.<sup>85</sup> The way these girls are presented fits precisely the trend to which Silverman and Miller object: *they are posed as individual exceptions rather than as proof of a structural tendency.*

The difference in presentation between boy and girl prodigies with creative skills may, in part, be a result of the second feminist wave, which has made these white, educated adults particularly alert to signs of “masculine”<sup>86</sup> creativity in girls. That is, nurturing girl genius may be seen as an act of emancipation. All the while, the value of Mozart-like creativity and the standard of exceptionality remain in place. The full impact of “being a girl” on prodigy performance, even if narrowed down on these two videos, exceeds the scope of this thesis. From the specific point of view audience response, it can nonetheless be added that girlness is far less debated than Asianness in user comments.<sup>87</sup>

The capacity to amaze, at second look, is a more specific than general form of productivity. Besides an audience, it requires a set of ideas on what *matters*: which qualities fall within the line of expectation or can be explained otherwise (Asianness), and which remain significant enough to be amazed about? The diversity of voices in the wider audiences beyond newspaper critics and philosophers has hardly been given a voice in prodigy research up until now. Instead, norms about classical piano performance and Mozart-like creativity are reiterated, overemphasized and *naturalized* in a continuation of masculine Western discourse. Clearly, norms are needed as a basis from which to differ. They provide the condition for the possibility to be amazed. Furthermore, an uncomfortably large group of viewers draw the link between being prodigy and being Asian, which functions as a rational explanation and diminution of the exceptional achievement in the case of those labeled Asian. Those on the other side, particular if they appear to have a “normal” childhood, enjoy the benefit of the notion of *truly* unexplainable, supposedly possessing an inborn or god-given talent. While it

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<sup>85</sup> Curiously enough, this turns around the equation and posits Mozart as an exception once more, but this time for the simple reason of being a boy. It may be useful to approach this as a causal explanation along the lines of Asianness: suppose girl prodigies, like Asians, are “nothing to be amazed about” and boy prodigies evoke the reaction: “finally, a boy prodigy!”

<sup>86</sup> The use of parentheses is now underpinned by the argument: “masculine” is reduced to a purely textual norm if women are indeed more commonly found at the extreme end.

<sup>87</sup> A further question to explore is how a prodigy in a girl’s body resonates differently with notions of cuteness and innocence than one in a boy’s body. Boy prodigies who are unafraid of the camera, such as Ethan and Mark, moreover, may be much more vulnerable to claims of fakeness, commercialism or arrogance. User Jonna Gran, for example, comments ‘awww so cute girl!!!’ on Paddler16’s video. For further examples, see appendix B.

may seem irrelevant through its overt simplification of a “naturecultural” phenomenon, Asianness must be recognized a serious force in prodigy performances today.

The remaining problem of definitions and domains is aptly captured in the following comment:

I don't believe Fantasie 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 Sonatas. Prodigies are by definition extraordinary, à la Magnus LeDue, or Josef Hofmann. If we loosen standards for what a prodigy is, then it loses all meaning. (InsideOutBH, comment on George)

While users often touch on the question whether the label of prodigy is justified or not, a characterization of “prodigy territory” in such detail is hard to find. In fact, it becomes all the more clear that the variety of intersecting categories and discourses make it such that *different rules matter in different performances*. In terms of the capacity to amaze, a three-year-old non-Asian girl in a living room setting faces *a radically different challenge* than a nine-year-old Asian child on a commercial TV show. And yet, these distinct varieties exist *in proximity to each other* through the YouTube niche.

This signals the problem of the seemingly self-explanatory and stable boundaries of the domain of music. Those who perform at the so-called margins of a genre, or cross-over between genres, thus face the difficulty of inappropriate norms. Mark Ehrenfriend, as discussed, stands at a particularly challenging edge between commercialism and an “art for art’s sake” perspective on piano performance. Another prodigy that challenges the boundaries of “classical piano performance” is Ethan Borthnick. He entered this domain at an early age but moved into jazz, popular, and crossover genres in later years.

In the documentary video, Ethan’s piano teacher Irena Kofmann states: ‘he plays sad music beautifully, but he does not relate yet to it, sad music. Though happy music, staccato, short—he is all in it [...]’ (Borthnick 2:52-3:03). She suggests that Ethan, at age five, does not have the patience yet to play “long lines” and “legato,” and enjoys “staccato” and happy moods instead. However, she could not predict that by the time Ethan celebrated his tenth birthday, he would have established an unusual prodigy career as a successful entertainer-singer-pianist, quite different from a standard traditional concert pianist career. Among his extraordinary achievements are a personalized concert series<sup>88</sup> across the United States, in

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<sup>88</sup> This concert series is hosted by the Public Broadcasting Service, the largest state-funded broadcasting company in the United States.

which he invited adult celebrity musicians (including Elton John) from diverse genres to perform with him.

The case of Ethan illustrates how a prodigy may leave (or perhaps, never properly enter) the institutionalized domain of classical piano performance. It could be said, in a most negative view, that Ethan's turn to commercial crossover genres testifies that his pianistic skills were not sufficient to become a concert pianist. Or, more positively, the move may have simply followed from changing preferences and a developing personality. It could be argued that Ethan eventually found a kind of performance that best suited his musical and entertaining skills. But all these views could, interestingly, be rephrased in terms of the most narrow, Mozart-like, definition of creativity: Ethan started in the domain of classical piano performance; *he recognized but did not respect the boundaries this domain*, which lead him to explore the boundaries and eventually *invent his own new forms, genres, and concert formats*. Prodigies, more generally, may be said to play with borders to other domains, genres, settings, niches, and invite us to rethink various categorizations including race, aesthetic norms, capitalism, and the Western notion of childhood and human.

Has Ethan Borthnick then succeed to effectively change the rules of classical piano performance? By way of experiment, let us imagine masses of eight to twelve-year-olds who recognize Ethan's early impatience with slow moods and long lines. These youngsters were themselves once dedicated amateur piano students. But with the age of adolescence approaching, their interests moves into other domains. At this point, they encounter Ethan Borthnick's show. It makes them realize that in fact, there may be much more to piano playing than classical repertoire. They may discover that stand-up comedy or improvising jazz with Cole Porter is truly more exciting than their weekly classical training, their homework of scales, etudes and sonatas. Now if "classical piano performance" is a domain, and if amateur performance is not excluded from it, then Ethan is a prodigy who has *not* left the domain unchanged. This provides support for a claim against Feldman and Morelock's distinction between prodigious and creative achievement, discussed at the start of this chapter. If no prodigy exists without an audience, it could even be argued that these young fans *are* the domain. The only way for teachers to keep these amateur (and, perhaps, future professional) practitioners engaged is by altering their lessons plans: by providing popular music and improvisation lessons and listening to the "demand."

It is unlikely that the authors included practicing amateurs as part of the audience when they pondered that the creativity label fits any child 'able to amaze a *sophisticated* audience with an astonishing display of technical virtuosity' (Feldman and Morelock 2011a, 264; my



emphasis). However, the high number of self-reflective comments on YouTube prodigy performances suggests that this group *does* constitute a very engaged and major audience group. Would it be helpful to include the voices of amateur practitioners as experts of a domain, at the very least of the domain called “amateur piano performance”? If we trust the self-reflective user comments, the perspectives on own abilities, motivations, and desires as practitioners are dramatically affected by prodigy videos. In other words: prodigies *do* change domains, they leave lasting marks even if it does not lead to their name being written in the history books of the future. In the next chapter, I will therefore engage in a theoretical reading from the perspective of the future, to see if and how such “invisible” contributions can be reconsidered at full value.

## Chapter 3 Prodigious Futures

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with prodigious futures. The plural indicates that there are multiple futures at stake: the futures of the numerous past and present prodigies discussed, the future of prodigy phenomenon in its specific relation to the Mozart figure, and the future in which new prodigies will emerge. The primary concern is not the teleological, unidirectional future, written out in history books as the seemingly neutral course of “notable” and “meaningful” events. In contrast to this disembodied perspective, I have used twenty-three prodigy performances on YouTube as case studies for a situated approach to the prodigy phenomenon. Prodigious futures will be conceptualized in an affirmative close reading of Feldman’s (1986) co-incidence theory along the lines of third-wave feminist and new materialist philosophies.<sup>1</sup> The prodigy’s “leap into the future,”<sup>2</sup> to speak with van der Tuin (2011), will be explored for its potentiality to reconfigure not only what comes next, but also for what has been perceived as an unchangeable and static part of past and present.

Affirmativity is a key term in new materialist research. Affirmative approaches focus on proximity and forging connections, offering an alternative against critical methods that focus on distinction and separation (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010). Importantly, the method of affirmative reading should not be confused with uncritical celebration. Attention will be given to similarities *and* differences in argumentative structure and content on a micro-level, which enables a comparison of viewpoints even when disciplinary and epistemological principles differ.<sup>3</sup> Feldman’s co-incidence theory will be read alongside critical perspectives on musicianship and the nature/culture dichotomy. The YouTube survey, which has left a wealth of material to explore, will provide concrete examples to support the theoretical argument of

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Van der Tuin 2011; Braidotti 2009; Grosz 2005a; Ahmed 2003

<sup>2</sup> I refer to Van der Tuin’s (2011) appropriation of the “quantum leap,” a key concept in Barad’s (2007) agential realism.

<sup>3</sup> To distinguish affirmation and critique, Van der Tuin (2011) draws on the feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz: Affirmative reading entails ‘a mode of assenting to rather than dissenting from those “primary” texts’ (23). Van der Tuin elaborates: ‘Grosz explicates how a critical rendering of texts, a gesture that is fundamentally a distancing act, functions “as a form of dismissal of texts, rather than as an analysis of the embeddedness of critique in that which it criticizes.” An affirmative reading does not allow for leaving a text untouched, and requires a text’s readers to engage with the transformation’ (ibid.).

this chapter. This argument, in short, proceeds through a highlighting of aspects that confirm a feminist politico-philosophical potential in co-incidence theory. In later sections, the affirmative approach of the chapter becomes explicit in the aim to acknowledge prodigies' truly transformative potential as active subjects in their own performances. Musical prodigies will prove their relevance as a phenomenon and figure that enables a post-individualist, a-teleological and ethically informed perspective on exceptional performance and creativity.

The relevance of this chapter to other-than-feminist projects is most evident in the primary task to address the "nature"<sup>4</sup> of the prodigy phenomenon. In elaboration of some unresolved issues encountered in previous chapters, furthermore, it will be discussed how musical prodigies pose a challenge to major topics in Western thought in their varied encounters with categories of boy and girl, Asian and non-Asian, commercial and "serious" genres. Besides creativity, challenged terms include individuality, temporality, human and childhood.

The following questions guide the inquiry: what are the main resonances between co-incidence and new materialist theory? What are the limitations of Feldman's view on individuality and temporality? Which complications and opportunities arise in the co-incidental perspective on domains and experts? What do new materialist perspective have to offer in answer to the problems encountered, and how may this lead to a better understanding the prodig phenomenon?

### **3.2 The Promise of Co-incidence: Individuality and Temporality**

Co-incidence theory shares with new materialist theories a differentiated view on individuality and temporality. This section maps the contours of co-incidence theory in a consecutive discussion of these two notions. According to Feldman's earliest definition, co-incidence denotes 'the melding of the many sets of forces that interact in the development and expression of human potential' (Feldman 1986, 11). Co-incidence forces, in principle, exceed the prodigy phenomenon. They are widespread and omnipresent, but become particularly visible in the case of prodigies. Feldman states: 'With prodigies the co-inciding of forces tends to be more sharply defined and their interactions more dramatic than in the development of potential in the average individual' (ibid.). In a solo-authored chapter contribution to the framework for the study of creativity (Feldman et al. 1994), Feldman is most explicit about

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<sup>4</sup> The quotation marks indicate that nature, here, is not understood as the realm of biological determination and neurological measurement opposed to culture, but a material-discursive configuration that determines the unusual and distinctly appropriate character of prodigy performances. These, as we have seen, are best understood as performances of "naturecultures."

how and which co-incidence forces shape individual expertise. Let us take the following quote in consideration:

Co-incidence forces include, for instance, the following: the evolving cultural context within the individual; the developmental trajectories of the significant other people who influence the child's developments (parents, siblings, relatives, friends, teachers, institutional officials, etc.); the particular set of historical events that bear on that individual; the many disciplines and fields with which the child will come to interact and the developmental histories of these fields; and, finally, long-term evolutionary trends that provide the backdrop for the rest of the process. [...] there must be hundreds of possible vectors of influence on development, including the centrally important specific physical, emotional, and intellectual qualities of the individual whose development we are trying to comprehend. (Feldman 1994a, 109)

As noted earlier, Feldman's theory is known as the first and most integral attempt to explain the nature of the prodigy phenomenon. Although I do not mean to neglect the revisions, critique and alternative perspectives that have been formulated since 1986 (e.g. Shavinina 2009, Ruthsatz and Urbach 2010), Feldman's theory offers a most viable and relevant entry point for various reasons. Firstly, Feldman insists in his recent accounts that the initial definition was meant to facilitate and organize research rather than prescribe or constrain it (Feldman and Morelock 2011a, 261; 2011b, 212).<sup>5</sup> This explicit invitation to adapt and rewrite offers a first ground of legitimation. A second reason to start here is that Feldman, for a psychologist (who would typically prioritize the isolated human individual), shows an unusual interest in the socio-cultural and historical forces taking part in individual development. The lengthy citation confirms this focus on the "supra-individual" and shows the width of forces taken into account. After all, he also includes evolution (i.e. biology).

In the chapter from which I cited above, Feldman takes the embodied, situated development of his theory as an example to demonstrate the workings of the tripartite 'framework for the study of creativity' (Feldman et al. 1994).<sup>6</sup> Describing the development as an example of creative emergence that exceeds consciousness, Feldman stresses the influence of a recurring dream about an amusement park ride. The image of a carousel, of which he actually provides a sketchy drawing, contains various parts which move and extract

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<sup>5</sup> Given the studies that have followed, started from or revised his definition, this aim has been met. See also the summary of prodigy research in chapter one.

<sup>6</sup> See chapter two, section 2.1.

independently from each other (Feldman 1994a, 106). The meaning of it kept him wondering until the following moment of insight:

When I stepped out of the shower in New York, I understood that the amusement park ride was an image capturing the multiplicity of dynamic forces that influence development and that do not at the same time compromise the integrity or importance of the individual's own contribution to the process. Development is not simply processed inside the mind of the individual—stages are not inside anyone's head—but as a result of complex, dynamic processes of coordination, change, adjustment, and new coordinations among the individual, the physical environment, the crafted world, and the social milieu. Although this process is extremely complex and ever changing, it is also controlled and lawful. (109)

Although the opening words may appear irrelevant and unnecessarily explicit from a psychological point of view, they add a situated dimension that in fact strengthens credibility and accuracy in terms of feminist epistemology (e.g. Haraway 1988). As a whole, the cited passage makes explicit how the relation of influence between individual and environment can be thought.

The meaning and content of 'the individual's own contribution' calls for further discussion, though. Feldman's attention to role of the individual fits my earlier characterization of co-occurrence theory as *non-constructivist*: it averts the critique that it posits the individual as a passively produced product of external culture (Cf. Shavinina 2009, 236).<sup>7</sup> Neither does he retreat to the psychological comfort of an exclusive focus on genes, consciousness and cognition. Feldman complicates the location and boundaries of the self by proposing that individual development does not take place inside the mind, but evolves in interactions both within and across the boundaries of bodily, physical, and social realms. What remains to be studied is whether Feldman sees the individual as a truly *active* contributor. Also, how does he account for the observation or perception of this contribution from the perspective of an external observer, an *extra*-individual position?

Co-occurrence thus complicates the notion of individuality. Individual beings are fundamentally entangled with their social surroundings and biology, part of an ongoing process. The location of individuality can neither be reduced to mind nor to consciousness. However, the implications of this view for explaining the nature of prodigious performance have not been properly studied yet by either Feldman or other prodigy scholars. Rather the

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<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, these critiques are based on a very narrow understanding of constructivism. The term "non-constructivist," accordingly, is used at this point to signal the contrast to these critiques rather than to oppose *all* constructivist approaches.

opposite: pragmatic distinctions often lead to a return of the split between isolated individual and the (biological, social) outside world. This can be seen in Feldman and Morelock's (2011b) summary of the most prominent layers of influence taken into account by co-occurrence: On the level of the *individual*, child prodigies are 'naturally endowed with extraordinary talent'; on the level of the *direct environment*, crucial facts are the child's family (often 'one parent who is totally devoted to the development of the child's talent') and teacher ('who must balance the astonishing capability of the child with the need to guide and direct the child's master of critical skills and knowledge, in proper sequence'); *the wider socio-cultural and historical context*, finally, contains factors such as the standards for excellent performance in the chosen domain. In contrast to before, co-occurrence now appears as an 'evolutionary and socio-historical framework' (214-215). The individual is no longer distributed and active, but rather fixed and passive. It provides the natural and passive matter ("inborn talent") on which culture acts.<sup>8</sup>

At other occasions, Feldman expands the notion of individual activity by stressing that the actualization of this given nature only happens under very specific coordination of emotional, physical and cognitive processes. But again, it soon appears that all sorts of environmental, supra-individual factors need to be "rightly tuned" for this individual activity to take place. It is, in other words, very hard to stay alert to active processes *of* and *within* the individual as soon as the co-occurrence framework is put to work. This is especially so when the discussion turns to the most familiar relationships and hierarchies associated with prodigies, such as master/student, parent/child, domain/individual or performer/audience. Consider the point where Feldman and Morelock (2011b) provide their revised definition:

A prodigy is defined as a child who, at a very young age (typically younger than ten years old), performs at an adult professional level in a highly demanding, *culturally recognized* field of endeavor. A prodigy's performance is ultimately assessed as being of a professional level through critiques based on standards of the field as well as the reaction of the *buying audience*,

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<sup>8</sup> The article discussed contains a further inconsistency. While the priority of psychological studies is understandable given the amount of publications in this field, Feldman and Morelock state in a footnote that they explicitly *exclude* writings by 'journalists, critics and historians.' Despite the 'valuable information about specific cases' these sources offer, they are not relevant because they do not count as 'social science research as such' (2011b, 212n). The (possibly editorial) decision to focus on one discipline stands on a sharp edge with co-occurrence theory itself, which acknowledges the dynamic nature of domains and boundaries. Moreover, it bypasses Feldman's own undergraduate training in history, as well as various essays in which co-occurrence has been taken to assess (in)famous prodigies of the past (e.g. Gardner 1994; see chapter one). As I aim to demonstrate in this thesis, finally, the humanities have more to offer than historical perspectives on individual prodigies' lives alone.

reflected, for example, in sales of paintings and positive reviews of performances. (212; my emphasis)

As an answer to the question ‘What makes a prodigy?’ this definition unmistakably foregrounds the active role of culture. It is very hard, however, to maintain an active conception of the child’s role within this definition. By “active,” I am not merely referring to the presentation of an exact and faithful copy of an existing Idea (e.g. “professional performance” or “Mozart-like performance”). Rather, I mean a creative, productive kind of activity, for example the activity of defining, judging, shaping and transforming the rules.<sup>9</sup>

In the light of the discussion of audiences in chapter two, however, it is significant that the definition cited above not only includes expert critics, but also *consumers* among those who assess the level of a prodigy performance. Nonetheless, it is telling that the experts’ role is depersonalized and hidden behind the “objective” task of critique, a task based on “standards of the field.” Who sets these standards? Who defines the field? Are the same standards legitimate in any event that forcefully or vaguely touches on the field? And, most of all, who has the capacity and authority to change them?<sup>10</sup> These questions will be addressed in later sections.

In addition to a differentiated view on individuality, co-occurrence theory offers a compelling view on prodigies in terms of movement and temporality. Consider Feldman’s (1986) attention to unique historical conditions in Mozart’s case, and, more generally, the unusual speed of the prodigy phenomenon: ‘It occasionally happens that in record time unusually young individuals move to the most advanced levels, traversing a distance that usually takes a

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<sup>9</sup> Feminist-Deleuzian musicologist Milla Tiainen (2012) takes precisely this turn in her reading of Elvis-impersonations in a student opera production along the lines of the “simulacrum” (Plato’s term for the “copy of the copy,” the third term besides Idea and copy). Whereas the logic of copy and original always comes with a judgment about the successful or unsuccessful resemblance to the original (see e.g. the discussion of “fake” prodigies in user comments, chapter two), simulacra offer the more radical potential of *groundless* formations (265). To cite Tiainen, ‘[simulacra] evoke a practically abysmal vision of instances of existence whose primary defining feature is difference and not identity. This is because simulacra do not stand *in* for supposedly stable referents. They rather stand in for themselves. It is in this way that the germ for the infinite return of difference freed from fixed transcendent ties informs the very fabric of Platonic, identity-favoring philosophy. By Deleuze’s account, the simulacrum, as an element of this philosophy, disturbs, even collapses, its model/copy logic from within’ (ibid).

<sup>10</sup> A consideration of Bourdieu’s writings on the cultural field would add a further dimension to the debate, but falls outside the scope of the discussion. Giving priority to a theory that more closely connects to giftedness studies and creativity research, I will turn to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s “Domain-Individual-Field-Interaction” model to elaborate on these issues in the next section.

decade or more of study' (79). Prodigies' unique temporality is thus expressed on multiple levels. It consists in a specific fastness of learning which defines the shortness of the time span within which certain skills are mastered. But it also concern the specific age range and adherent transience of the prodigy phenomenon, and furthermore, the specific coordination of movements or historicity of the cultural domain and wider society. Movement, importantly, is recognized as much on the level of the domain of expertise as on that of the wider environment. Feldman's emphasis on process and movement follows the general trend of developmental psychology.<sup>11</sup> It is unusual, however, that the developmental perspective is extended beyond the level of individual being. Yet, this is what Feldman does. He conceptualizes the domain as a developmental phenomenon, a kind of living organism in itself, characterized by distinct stages of development. The relations of movements are beautifully depicted in the following passage:

When we see a prodigy we are actually seeing a kind of coordination of a child with certain specific capabilities and a domain with certain complementary demands. The interaction between prodigy and domain represents the coordination of two developmental histories—that of the individual and the domain—during a critical period of time. *One can imagine a rapidly moving rocket hitching a ride with a planet for a while, since they both happen to be in the same orbit and each is served in some way by the other [...].* (78; my emphasis)

To see a prodigy, in other words, is to see an interaction between (at least) two moving assemblages: individual and domain.<sup>12</sup> This observation offers an important clue for reconsidering the (distant and nearby) past of prodigies. If the prodigy experience is a specific occasion of witnessing two moving systems, then looking back on Mozart, from the perspective of the present, is a profoundly different experience from the experience of any eighteenth-century witness. This is most importantly so, because rules and values change over

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<sup>11</sup> Feldman describes the developmental perspective as a recent turn in the intellectual history of Western culture, introduced by Darwin. Developmental psychology typically focuses on individual human beings, but Feldman's original move is to study "bodies of knowledge" (i.e. domains) from the same perspective. Developmental research on domains, as he explains, would not foreground events, mature works, or static states, but rather the 'psychological processes that gave rise to, catalyzed and ultimately transformed these fields [sic]'. Individual being remains privileged, however, as he continues to characterize the process in terms of 'developmental changes ... *in the key individuals* in each field' (1986, 78).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Shavinina (2009), who paraphrases Gardner's static conception of the domain-child (as opposed to the domain-adult) relation as follows: 'There is a strong contrast between the adult creators (who must discover their own styles of creativity and the domain in which they can excel, and are formed as personalities by their family) and the child prodigy (who must construct a creative personality, having his or her domain as given by the birthright)' (237).



time.<sup>13</sup> Contemporaneous listeners did not know that Mozart would receive a solid place in the narrative of the development of Western art music. If they perceived a domain at all, if there was consensus over a distinct set of standards and rules, they saw the domain in an unfinished state. Now, is it possible to situate a given performance, if only provisionally and temporarily, at either “the forefront” or “strictly within the bounds” of a domain?<sup>14</sup> The upcoming discussion of domains reveals that spatial characterizations of this kind rely on a positivist and cultural evolutionist belief in progress. My argument, instead, aims to account for the radical openness of a domain-in-process, and the impossibility of knowing the future movement of a domain.

### **3.3 Domains That Produce Prodigies?**

A closer look at the notion of domain and its relation to the individual reveals some important limitations of co-incidence theory. Under the revealing title ‘Domains that produce prodigies,’ Feldman characterizes the domain as ‘a body of knowledge’ that must be mastered; a ‘relatively stable set of structures of knowledge and practice’ and ‘a set of levels of expertise’ (1986, 77). In what follows, he foregrounds the active and constitutive role of the domain in prodigy performances. Despite their relative degree of stability and consistency, domains are neither fixed nor universal systems. The developmental perspective instead invokes the suggestion of an organism that is akin to living beings: ‘the prodigy and the domain are two expressions of complementary developmental processes’ (76). Developmental processes are more than mere change. They include ‘major qualitative changes in organization, structure, technology, and practice,’ or ‘major changes or reorganization over a period of several generations of practice’ (77). To facilitate the emergence of a prodigy, a developmental domain not only provides (or prescribes) various levels of mastery, but also a sequential passage through stages of proficiency for those who aspire to become masters.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Feldman recognizes this point in both his early and more recent work. To cite his early work: ‘Changes in criteria and period of instability may profoundly affect who will be credited with doing the most important work at a given moment and what the most valued work will be like’ (1986, 80). A similar point is made in his recent work on creativity with Morelock (2011a, 263).

<sup>14</sup> These are terms used by Lynn Goldsmith (2000, 109), co-writer of Feldman’s 1986 study.

<sup>15</sup> The requirements of a developmental domain, to cite Feldman’s own summary, include the following: ‘A domain must afford a range of performance both within and across ages that is sufficiently great to reveal qualitative differences in talent. There must be products of performance [...] that can be evaluated by means of a coherent and relatively consistent set of standards of excellence. The domain must recognize reasonably clear levels of achievement ranging from those of the novice to those of the seasoned master. The domain, to be

How does Feldman depict the roles of nature and culture in this context? On the one hand, the domain and the individual child are treated as equal and independent entities, or organisms. To the extent that they show consistent characteristics and display a pattern of predictable development, they are treated in the same way that scientists approach natural phenomena. On the other hand, Feldman stresses that both are human-made constructs, products of culture: '[A prodigy and a domain] are interdependent yet distinct manifestations of *human intellectual history*' (ibid.; my emphasis). Imagine a rocket engineer making a similar reservation regarding the planet which his rocket is about to confront. The statement does not stand on its own, but fits a larger narrative on human progress that permeates the study. I will give only two of countless examples:

When we see a prodigy we are seeing evidence that in certain respects humanity has made headway in the process of finding ways to use a particular talent, one that may have been "stored" genetically in the species for thousands of years. (230)

The child prodigy is tangible evidence of progress in the collective human effort to cultivate and distill knowledge, to preserve it and pass it on. (231)

Prodigies are not only products of culture, according to the evolutionist view; they represent the most optimal manifestation, the summit of human evolution at a certain moment in time. The notion of the superiority of the human species and the human control of nature has lost credibility in the context of cultural, feminist and politico-theoretical critiques on human exceptionalism.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, in Feldman and Morelock's (2011a) earlier discussed chapter on creativity, the same perspective marks the closing statement.

A prodigy represents one of the most rare and precious manifestations of harmony between cultural and biological evolution. To have found a way to give full expression to the natural human potential of its young is one of culture's highest aspirations. In the prodigy we see that effort in one of its most successful forms, a tribute to our civilization, and a gift from all previous generations to all future ones. (265)

Even in a context of shifting views on creativity, changing values and conditions and the recognition of non-individual forms of creativity, prodigious performance remains an

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distinguished from other fields, needs to exhibit a set of distinctive concepts that pertain to some of its special qualities of performances, such as a "four-wheel drift" in auto racing or "chiaroscuro" in graphic arts. Domains must also have pedagogical traditions [... with some degree of] formality [allowing] self-conscious transmission [...]. Finally, a culture or social group must value and reward achievement in a field if it is to be maintained. This is particularly true in relation to the appearance and preparation of prodigies' (1986, 86).

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Haraway (2008).

achievement of the human species, and of culture.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the story told is a progress narrative. Before I elaborate, one aspect of terminology needs to be addressed.

Feldman's interchangeable use of the terms "field" and "domain" complicates a thorough understanding of the domain and its relation to the individual. The prevalent distinction in his 1986 study, instead, is between domain/field on the one hand and "wider culture" on the other. The co-authored framework for the study of creativity, published eight years later, offers a more consistent use of terms. Following co-author Csikszentmihalyi's model of Domain-Individual-Field-Interaction ("DIFI"),<sup>18</sup> the domain still denotes an 'organized body of knowledge,' but this time it has a distinctly impersonal and abstract character. The field, by contrast, is a "multipersonal" assemblage that includes 'all those persons who can affect the structure of a domain' (Feldman et al. 1994, 22).<sup>19</sup> This more-refined distinction draws attention to the relation between norms and experts, and to actual individuals who interact with, affect, and affirm the abstract rules. Whereas mathematics and music first featured as examples of a domain, in the latter conception they are examples of a cultural field. The domain, instead, is a smaller subfield, a specialization, genre, or niche that is typically governed by a unique set of rules. The authors offer an additional pragmatic advice for the study of creativity: 'the task in describing a domain is to choose a level of description that allows potential new knowledge to be evaluated in relation to existing knowledge' (ibid.). In other words, the scale of the domain can be adjusted according to specific creative events.<sup>20</sup> For the continuation of this inquiry, it is worth keeping these remarks in mind.

As stated above, the next problem to be addressed is the progress narrative. This narrative appears in the assumption that all domains move in parallel, or at least, that there is only one kind of development. As developmental organisms, all domains move progressively through

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<sup>17</sup> The celebratory tone of this passage appears to be motivated to counterbalance what the authors may have felt to be a negative outcome concerning the relationship between prodigies and creativity according to most recent research. The citation closes a discussion in which the link between prodigies and creativity is fundamentally questioned. The proposition to distinguish between "prodigious achievement" and "creative achievement" leaves the average prodigy performance as a possibly astonishing but decidedly non-creative achievement. This is a poor outcome as long as creativity (in the sense of "leaving a lasting mark") remains a marker of exceptional performance. I return to this point below.

<sup>18</sup> This constitutes one of the three parts of the framework. See chapter two, introduction.

<sup>19</sup> The authors refer to 'art teachers, art historians, art critics, collectors, gallery owners, curators, and the peer group of artists [...] whose interaction defines styles and revolutions of taste' (Feldman et al. 1994, 22).

<sup>20</sup> This supports my earlier suggestion to treat "classical piano performance," "new music composition," and the "musical prodigy niche" as distinct domains.

similar stages, from chaos towards a state of “complex yet coherent differentiation” (Feldman 1986, 91). On the one hand, Feldman thus recognizes the variable and changing nature of domains through changing cultural values, historical circumstances, and other forces. Yet, on the other hand, he does not allow for differentiation on a deeper level: all domains eventually develop towards a similar kind of state, which he describes as ‘complex yet coherent differentiation’ (ibid.). The end points may vary, but the direction of movement is the same. This view excludes the possibility that each domain may develop according to its own, unique logic, of which the significant qualities are as yet unknown. Rather than moving from a beginning to an end point, from chaos to “coherent complexity,” they may be drawing a trajectory from one kind of chaos to another kind of chaos, whereby the trajectory, and not the end point, is what marks unique character (or, exceptionality).<sup>21</sup>

This notion of a universal direction of movement for all domains returns in Feldman’s view on the individual. Put bluntly, all individuals appear to have the same goal in life. This teleological, evolutionist view seeps through the entire study, for example in the aim of the study (as the subtitle indicates) to contribute to the ‘development of human potential.’ Admittedly, there is room for difference in the sense that each individual may have its own destination, a specialization that fits the unique (biologically given) disposition and the available cultural conditions. It is recognized that individuals, even child prodigies themselves, may attach different meanings to one and the same expression.<sup>22</sup> But ultimately, these individual variations fall under one movement of development, they share one goal and have one optimal end-state:

A prodigy has the potential to be a modern person, a person of the twentieth century. [...] By modern I mean that there is a core, especially strong in the prodigy, that arbitrates, selects, and organizes the myriad possibilities and influences into a coherent plan of mastery. (Feldman 1986, 229)

Feldman goes on to suggest that the prodigy reflects ‘a fundamental increase in the integrity and existence of a sense of self and the notion that it is one’s birthright to select one’s own life course’ (ibid). All variation thus depends on the concept of modern

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<sup>21</sup> This is precisely how Deleuze and Guattari (1987) conceptualize their approach to philosophy.

<sup>22</sup> Feldman states: ‘Whatever the expression ... might mean to the prodigy himself, it should indicate to the rest of us that we have, collectively, been able to lay before one of our own the distilled efforts of countless generations... shown that we are capable of communicating even to a mere child the essence of a highly complex symbolic domain’ (Feldman 1986, 230).

personhood. The view is based on an individualist notion of self, marked by control over one's destiny, self-determination, and, ideally, a linear progression towards cultural recognition and eminence. These are the classical tropes of modern humanism.<sup>23</sup> The key problem is that individual expression, and thereby individuality itself, ultimately depends on creative contribution in the traditional sense. To be perceived as an individual in the most optimal sense, it is necessary to "make a difference" in a recognized domain. All other expressions are of a lesser degree on the same scale. Individuality beyond domains is either inexistent, or imperceptible. The higher purpose and meaning of prodigious performance, in this view, is to exemplify and embody the movement of human progress or cultural evolution.<sup>24</sup>

The limitations of this position have been addressed in abundant and persistent critiques from theorists of culture, politics, gender, colonialism and history. For the current discussion, however, it is most relevant to observe how the principles of co-incidence theory itself pose a challenge. If the attention of temporal and cultural specificity of domains were consistent, it would include ideas that belong to the "wider environment." Although widely shared, the idea of human progress is specific; it is rooted in a Western tradition of thought that originates at a particular historical time. Following the pragmatic use of terminology, noted above, it can be said that Feldman overlooks the cultural specificity and temporality of the *domain* of modern humanism in which his theory is situated.

There is a second inconsistency. The unquestioned embrace of the progress narrative contradicts Feldman's attention to what he calls "unknown forces." This topic receives full attention in a later chapter of his 1986 study (187-204). Unknown forces include unexplainable, arguably spiritual or supernatural experiences that mark the lives of multiple prodigies in his study. It is significant that these experiences are discussed, even though their relevance to a scientific or theoretical understanding of prodigies is not (yet) clear. For Feldman, they are important because they are shared and significant experiences in the lives of several prodigies in his study. This openness to the unknown can be understood as a future-

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Colebrook (2004).

<sup>24</sup> Feldman nonetheless presents his framework as an alternative against the abstracted ideal of autonomous individual personhood of "mainstream" developmental psychology (referring to Piaget, Erikson; See Feldman 1986, 229). His theory, indeed, is more than averagely situated in history and culture, and takes note of inborn, embodied differences alongside external, material conditions. But when it comes to the production of a significant creative contribution, Feldman returns to the privileged, exceptionalist and androcentric, seemingly neutral notion of individual human achievement. He takes a first important step by adding culture to the equation, but does not proceed by recognizing the cultural specificity of his universal humanism.

oriented perspective: the researching subject recognizes the temporality, situatedness, and epistemological limitations of his or her own work (Cf. Haraway 1988). A more consistent pursue of this line of thought evokes the question: How do we know that what we perceive as a prodigy's domain at a certain moment is the only, the most real, or the most important domain? In an important sense, the domain is always already a domain of the past at the moment of perception. This limitation of perception will be further addressed from the point of view of experts in the section hereafter. It will be asked: Who has the authority to speak as the "expert" and what remains of prodigious individuality, if the domain itself is fundamentally unstable?

To round off the current discussion, let us briefly look at how the progress narrative returns in Feldman's perspective on the future. As it turns out, the modern humanist view translates into a universal ethics, leaving no question about the significance of genius-like contributions:

The more matches we can stimulate between individuals and domains, the better the chances of people finding their own voice and making a significant contribution. [...] Optimizing individual expression [...] encompasses more than simple survival. It assumes that each person has something unique to say and desires to use his or her unique mix of talents and experiences to leave a lasting mark. (Feldman 1986, 231; my emphasis)

On the level of ethics and aims, this view lacks a distinction between what may be good for a cultural domain and what may be good for an individual prodigy. Obvious differences exist between the interests of society, of individuals, groups, the market, stakeholders, not to mention the natural environment. For Feldman, these are all subsumed under either irrelevant subjectivity or wider environment.<sup>25</sup>

Let us return briefly to Manuel Delanda, (2003) who refers to this domain as the "age of individualism" in his essay on Foucault and the archive, noted in chapter two. The "new archives" (which include all sorts of textual, written data) have 'objectified individuals not as members of a pre-existing category, but in all their uniqueness and singularity' (11). He elaborates:

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<sup>25</sup> A further problem, which exceeds the scope of the current discussion, is that the progress narrative is extended to a utopian image of pleasure, satisfaction and well-being. Feldman states: 'Development means satisfaction and fulfillment, not just survival, and somehow in that desire for fulfillment humanity strives to give meaning to its own history [...], new possibilities for expression are created, and the long-term well-being of the species is enhanced' (Feldman 1986, 231; Cf. Csikszentmihalyi 1994).

Far from being archivable in terms of their shared properties, human beings became linked to all the unique series of events [...] a history which could now take the form of a file while the individual became a case. *And the degree to which someone became archivable now varied in inverse proportion to their normality: "In a system of discipline, the child becomes more individualized than the adult, the patient more than the healthy man, the madman and the delinquent more than the normal and non-delinquent."* (ibid.)

Although co-incidence theory thus at first appears to offer a viable alternative, but now turns out to *exemplify* rather than escape the age of individualism. The same can be said of the prodigy phenomenon itself. Co-incidence theory exemplifies the individualist age through its attention to historical, cultural and biological specificity; prodigies do so in their exceptionality *as children*, following Delanda.<sup>26</sup> To rephrase the problem, the notion of individual itself is to some extent a product of the domain of modern humanism. This error was already contained in the amusement park ride image, discussed above. No matter how complex the interactions between individual component parts and surrounding forces are, the image nonetheless represents the coherency and consistency of *one* (human-made) design, *one* purpose, and *one* proper or optimal way of functioning. The optimal cooperation between its parts produces the satisfaction and pleasure of flying high.

The recognition of the specificity of the domain is a necessary step towards thinking beyond it. It reveals the relevance of considering next, for example, the potentiality and effect of unanticipated, undesirable or "improper" movements in and of the system. Unexpected weather conditions, technological malfunctioning, or human mistakes which lead to errors in design; these potentially life-threatening forces are always present in the case of the amusement park ride. Yet, for a worry-free experience of pleasure (and for knowledge production), they are better strategically ignored.<sup>27</sup>

A way out of this seemingly unmarked discursive formation is by following up on musicologist Carolyn Abbate, who sheds light on prodigies' complicated position between

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<sup>26</sup> Neither social constructivists nor critics of bourgeois ideology offer viable alternatives, in Delanda's view. They turn to the "subjective interiority" of constructed identity and consequently overlook the actual problem outlined by Foucault, which Delanda sums up as an 'objective exteriority in which human bodies, events, and archives interact' (2003, 11).

<sup>27</sup> At another point, Feldman invokes the image of sailing to depict the task of 'harnessing the forces of co-incidence' (1986, 220). As he puts it, sailing entails a subtle coordination between natural, technological, and other forces, whereby the sailor is not in a position of full control but constantly negotiates towards the desired goal (220-231). This emphasizes another aspect of the problematic: the challenge is unambiguously presented as a task of parents and educators rather than of prodigy's themselves.

categories of adult and child, human and nonhuman in her seminal article ‘Outside Ravel’s Tomb’ (1999). Abbate traces the historical and philosophical meanings of music machines and animated objects, two motifs which Vladimir Jankélévitch identified as central in composer Maurice Ravel’s (1875-1937) musical oeuvre. The motifs are found to be generally significant in musical modernism (the genre practiced by Ravel and other early twentieth-century composers). The “tombeau” which features in two of Ravel’s major works, shares with musical automatons, and, interestingly, with human performers and musical prodigies, the “uncanny” association of a dead shell or box, which is “animated from within.” Along these lines, Ravel’s use of music machines and animated objects can be understood as ‘modernist reflections on human subjectivity in music, its loss in mechanical reproduction, and the futility of seeking lost objects by breaking open a tomb’ (530).

Following this view, the prodigy experience (i.e. to witness a prodigy) can be explained as, in part, a conflict between discursive categories in aesthetic thought, specifically the idea of human individuality (to which Abbate refers as the Enlightenment “Subject”) and the mind/body dualism. Abbate emphasizes that the male, disembodied human mind is the exclusive location of soul and consciousness. The idealist Subject, moreover, is an adult. Children, indeed, are not commonly considered to have access to full consciousness<sup>28</sup> 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’ (480; my emphasis).<sup>29</sup> Although it directs attention to the abilities of the child, this statement more fundamentally touches on the limitations of “us,” adult observers, who assume certain limitations on the child’s part. With the discussion of audience response of previous chapters in mind, it becomes clear that the aesthetic ideas, privileging adults, are still forcefully present.

It may be concluded at this point that the focus in research on prodigies as individuals (whether oriented towards abilities or achievements) is another symptom of the modern-humanist domain. 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

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Mann’s (1936) unusual depiction of consciousness, cited as the epigraph of this thesis and discussed in the introduction.

<sup>29</sup> Shortly after, Abbate invokes the performer/composer dualism in a statement that reinforces the Mozart figure: ‘One reason the child Mozart so astonished his audiences was that by improvising or playing his own compositions, he managed to retrieve his soul from the clavichord’s lid’ (1999. 481; Cf. Richards 1999).



underestimated or simply denied. This objectification of childhood severely limits the possibility of perceiving prodigies as active, creative and authentic subjects. Adults' superior capacities to perceive, conversely, are presupposed without further question. In what follows, I start to redress this imbalance by questioning the authority of those adults that have a particularly strong voice in prodigy assemblages: the experts.

### 3.4 Who Are the Experts?

Who has the authority to speak as the “expert” and what remains of prodigious individuality, if the domain itself is fundamentally unstable? The situated perspective from which prodigy research begins may be described as that of an expert professional; prodigy scholars are perhaps no experts in the domain of classical music performance (although in my case that holds true), but at least in the domain of research on prodigies. I have suggested that amateur practitioners of all ages may as well be counted as experts, since they constitute an important audience of prodigies.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it is obvious that prodigies themselves are experts of some sort. In this section, however, I draw on examples of encounters between prodigies and adults; whereby the adults claim the expert legitimacy to define and assess prodigy performance. A brief exploration of the boundaries of the prodigy domain serves to destabilize their authority in advance.

The problematic of domains and individuality makes clear that the status of experts is in no way self-explanatory. The expert draws his or her own boundaries, which may or may not lead to a favorable assessment of the prodigy in question. As a way to reduce privilege and bias, I propose to accept a radical uncertainty regarding expert legitimacy. This has substantial consequences for systematic studies. For example, it becomes a challenge not to exclude those that appear to fall outside the scope, definition or criteria. These “non/prodigies”<sup>31</sup> are precisely the people from whom much can be learned about current norms and standards. In a sense, the earlier discussions of Mark Ehrenfried, Ethan Borthnick, Nuron Mukumiy, and Paddler<sup>16</sup> addressed such boundary zones. They all show distinct ways of differing from the norm, from the Mozart figure, and from other trends in the prodigy niche.

Further insights could be gained from cases that have effectively *not* made it into the survey, such as the five-year-old Yoo Ye Eun, whose not very spectacular rendition of ‘Für

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<sup>30</sup> See chapter two.

<sup>31</sup> I borrow Karen Barad's use of the forward slash to emphasize the entanglement of prodigies and nonprodigies, to draw attention the moment before the “agential cut” produces a distinct object. See introduction.

Elise' attracts a prodigy-like audience nonetheless by the additional fact that she is blind.<sup>32</sup> Or Gui Gui Zheng, who attracts a similar audience with a performance that stands out through the fact that the girl pianist has no fingers on one hand.<sup>33</sup> The latter is announced as a prodigy with only three years of practice, even though she exceeds the prodigy age range by far with her twenty-one years. It would be impossible to properly address these prodigies' capacities to amaze without taking their "disability"<sup>34</sup> into account. Some may argue that this sets them apart and makes them unfit for a comparison on equal terms. I contest the very notion of equal terms: it reinforces an implicit privilege of abled bodies. Instead it is more relevant think of their "disability" along the lines of Asianness: an aspect of the prodigy assemblage that adds some sort of explanatory value. While heightening rather than decreasing the sensation, both Asianness and disability serve as rational explanations of the capacity to amaze. They distract from the "music itself," and from the possibility of transformative creativity in the traditional sense.

Expert status, however, deserves to be reconsidered even in cases that appear to fall *within* the boundaries of the prodigy definition, at first sight. The following discussion of two encounters between prodigy and adult shows that there is a strong connection between adult privilege and prodigies' capacity to express individuality. The first example derives from a video that was not included in the survey, but that closely links to the home-recorded video of Tsung Tsung. It is a video in which Tsung Tsung is invited to perform on *The Ellen Show*.<sup>35</sup> At a certain point, talkshow host Ellen Degeneres asks 'Who is your favorite composer?' The five-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, famous pictures of the child 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."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> <http://youtu.be/LfgZGm3nOOs> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>33</sup> [http://youtu.be/VbhW\\_K3NvmQ](http://youtu.be/VbhW_K3NvmQ) (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>34</sup> Disability is a delusive and inappropriate term here, because it effectively adds up to the exceptional abilities of the prodigious performance.

<sup>35</sup> <http://youtu.be/6dLkyJJ4x3s> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>36</sup> This video is included in the survey. See appendix A.

Following a smooth delivery of ‘Flight of The Bumblebee,’ a middle-aged, bearded and white, male jury member<sup>37</sup> confronts the seven-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 appear 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; my transcript)

In both situations, the adult expert shows interest in the prodigy’s personal motivations. Yet, both times the given answer falls so neatly within lines of expectation that it is hard to understand it as authentic, honest and spontaneous. It makes clear how difficult it is to perceive of 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 instructed or led the child’s answer to this question. The image of Mozart in the background reveals that the answer was anticipated and probably rehearsed. It is hard to perceive of it as a spontaneous and sincere answer. It rather appears to be one of many iterations of the “next Mozart” trope, making him a prodigy “like all other prodigies.”

It is worth to consider how the dialogue continues. Directly after, Degeneres steers the conversation towards a more mundane desire. Tsung Tsung would like to have dog. He already made up a remarkable name for him, which translates into ‘Teddy and Little Floral Print’ (1:58-2:17). His wish to have a dog, in contrast to the previous question, makes him to some extent “different from all other prodigies.” It sounds like a more plausible and authentic desire for a five-year-old and conveys the message that Tsung is nonetheless a child “like

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<sup>37</sup> The name of this person is Kyle Sandilands. He is known as a “shock jock” (a DJ pushing the limits of controversial and offensive language) on Australian radio and he acted as a juror for many similar TV shows in Australia. The name is not included above, because it is not made explicit in the cited excerpt.

every other child.” However, it strongly resonates with a narrative that returns in all documentary-format prodigy videos studied for this survey. It presents the image of a Mozart-like, precocious and exceptional young musician who is nonetheless a “normal” child; worrisome, playful, enjoying “childlike” things and activities.<sup>38</sup>

The encounter between Shuan Hern Lee and the jury member presents a less innocent, intact, and painful example of Asian stereotyping. The white adult’s worry about involuntary 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 an actual and honest response. 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 thinkable answer: ‘Yes I like it, I like it myself.’ Rather than a sincere interest in the human (and humane) 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. By expressing the trope of worry about abuse, he affirms his own civilized, human, and notably Western stance regarding child raising methods against an image of “inhumane” Asian culture.

Suppose for a moment that the child would have retorted: ‘Yes, I am forced against my will.’ It would not only have unforeseeable consequences regarding the relation to his family, but it 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 (adult, Western) tropes of appropriate, “childlike” desires, voluntariness, and in/human<sup>39</sup> and in/humane pedagogies. In this light, 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. The only one competing example of authentic pleasure expressed by a prodigy is the three-year-old Jonathan, who, likewise in pajamas, conducts his imaginary

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<sup>38</sup> E.g. Gavin George’s and Emily Bear’s documentary videos are textbook examples of this narrative.

<sup>39</sup> Following Karen Barad (2007) once more, the slash indicates that the very distinction between human and inhuman, humane and inhumane, is not pre-existent but drawn in the moment, produced by the act of measurement.

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.<sup>40</sup>

The 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 pretended. The interactions in which prodigies get to speak are strongly determined by adult tropes of childness, Asianness, and Mozart-likeness. Signs of pleasure comfort the Western viewer because it implies a voluntary participation of the child and reduces the worry about forced practice. Remember the image of a rocket hitching a ride. It serves to formulate the problem of individuality differently. If the prodigy-child is understood to be the rocket, it is a product of human civilization, a solid piece of technology. The planet, or domain, on the other hand, represents nature beyond human control, yet knowable through its predictable movement. Both are passive in the sense that they lack consciousness, intention and free will. The first obeys human control; the second obeys the laws of nature. The problem of prodigious individuality comes down to the question: who controls the rocket? In co-incidental encounters with human adults and adult discourses we are focused on external human control; the earth-based mission control room, if you will. What remains indiscernible is the rocket’s internal configuration: there is no way to tell a manned and an unmanned rocket apart on the basis of its effective movements.

### **3.5 A Positive and a Negative Mode of Response**

Prodigy theory, so far, turns out to be a theory of the co-incidental contribution of nature to culture. That is, nature’s variation becomes purposeful in service of a dominant external culture. Culture’s dominant stake in the prodigy phenomenon, in turn, may be most clearly expressed in the role of experts. They have the authority of setting and knowing the rules of a domain, and the power to either affirm or deny the very reality of a prodigious performance on the basis of these norms. A wide ‘mainstream’ community commonly endorses the expert’s legitimacy. It presents a gendered relation in which one subject position (“expert”) has the authority to define and label the identity of another (“prodigy”). In fact, the latter can hardly be called a subject, as we don’t know how to perceive of its individuality.

If we try to shift the focus from achievement towards ability, the problem remains that at least some kind of achievement or performance is required for exceptional ability to be

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<sup>40</sup> However, for both videos the attention of being filmed, and praise upon finishing may have been important incentives to perform.

recognized. This recognition may be very local, as in a family or a single admirer, or widespread, when multiple scholars, the media, and professionals share the same view. Both scenarios are situated and specific, each invested in a specific set of interests and desires. The first may be driven by a personal aim for fame or money, an honest interest in the development of potential, or pride. The second type is the one most typically addressed in prodigy research. As mentioned before, many studies (including this one) count public recognition as one among other basic criteria of prodigiousness. But allowing the voice of a “mainstream” authority to define what prodigy means leads to inequality: the limiting and enabling intersections with Asianness and other categories of difference have been extensively discussed.

Some scholars have suggested that the terms prodigy and *Wunderkind* are “loaded” concepts that may be better replaced with a focus on other terms, such as giftedness or precocity.<sup>41</sup> In an attempt to sidestep both the hegemonic judgment of the cultural domain and the associations with the “supernatural,” the prodigy-notion is replaced with seemingly more inclusive terms. Following Silverman and Miller (2009), this may be understood as a move from achievement towards abilities. The new terms offer more space to address *unactualized* abilities, to include previously unrecognized potentiality, and to distance oneself from cultural norms. Although sharing the aim to include less obvious and covered forms of exceptional performance, I do not expect that abandoning the term solves the issue. Instead, it is more relevant to explore the notion from *within*, to search for ways of opening it up towards more differentiation on its own. Silverman and Miller neither suggest to leave the notion of achievement altogether. They rather call for an *expansion* of the meaning of achievement as a way to be more inclusive across categories of gender, race and class (122).

The remaining pages of this thesis will be used to outline such an expansion. To expand the meaning of “prodigy” is not a relativistic or generalizing move towards the point of recognizing “the inner prodigy in all of us.” Rather, it entails a highly specific and *productive* expansion. In line with the first observations, an increased attention to temporality (movement, historicity, speed, and duration) is a first step in the right direction. What a prodigy is actually capable of doing is not a question of a static present. The real question is *what a prodigy may have turned out to be capable of in the future*. We must start from the notion that statements about achievement and contribution will never be finite.

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<sup>41</sup> For concrete examples, see Unsfeld (2010, 528) and Feldman and Morelock (2011, 215). Cf. Winner, (1996) who turns to giftedness but holds on to the term prodigy for ‘the most extreme children’ (5).

Looking back at all the prodigy performances and responses in this study, two contrasting tendencies can be identified. The first is a negative, skeptical, rationalist approach, which is strong and effective in denying the reality of prodigiousness at large: no matter what we see and hear, it can be rationalized as mimicry, as excessive practice or illusion of another kind. Children may show spontaneous and unstructured behavior, but this does not equate with “artistic” creativity.<sup>42</sup> The seventeenth-century critic Ange Goudar found the idea of an improvising child prodigy so implausible that he contended: ‘they must have simply memorized all possible variations they were able to perform’ (cited in Abbate 1999, 480). Likewise, my initial attempt to interpret Nuron Mukumi’s performance (as a little laborer, perfectly mimicking adult expression) was marked by a search for *external* sources to explain the exceptional performance.

The second kind is a positive, affirmative mode of response, which often has a transcendentalizing effect. Examples are the presentation of Alma Deutscher, Goethe’s remarks on Mendelssohn, and the numerous remarks on Mozart. It comes with a strong commitment to an obvious and irrefutable exceptionality, a belief in the “miracle,” so to speak. It accepts the individuality of a performance to such an extent that it justifies the creation of new terms (“automatic genius”) and the dedication of serious scholarship to it.

It is worth observing how most psychological studies on prodigies stand squarely on these terms. On the one hand, these studies strongly commit to the rationalist position, searching for explanations of exceptional performance in genetic disposition, cognitive functioning, developmental history and environment factors. And yet, in the search for the “inner mechanisms,” prodigies remain a mute and passive product of their given nature. No prodigy scholar, to my knowledge, has ever considered that perhaps a child with the “perfect” prodigy-attuned mix of individual characteristics, in the perfect circumstances, may still choose not to follow the trajectory towards prodigious performance. Indeed, strong determination, free will and conscious act are highly plausible in precocious individuals.

Thus, I suggest, prodigy research should at least include the possibility that individual consciousness on the side of the prodigy plays a part in prodigious performance. This idea might further challenge current models and interpretations of giftedness on a more fundamental level. After all, what would remain to systematic observation or “measurement” if one needs to take into account that all observations may be the result of either an arbitrary

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Gardner and Wolf (1994, 65).

or a deliberate act. It may be an act of individual expression of a child; who, in turn, may either arbitrarily or deliberately remain silent about his or her motivations to do so.

Clearly, it is less complicated and more fitting to psychological methods to focus exclusively on the idea of the “rage to master,” an uncontrollable force of the unconscious, of nature. Given this position, it is strange that prodigy scholars widely cite the case of Mozart with little attempt to demystify his transcendental position. Furthermore, once a child matches the (provisional) criteria of prodigiousness and becomes a case study in prodigy research, the prodigious nature of this case is taken as a given. Put differently, scholarly consensus about the reality of “undeniable” prodigies is an example of affirmation and commitment to the phenomenon. Consider that a stubborn, rationalist critic, after all, could follow Goudar’s line of reasoning and render *all* prodigy performances unreal. I propose, instead, to affirm the temporality of achievement, which means to take into account that Mozart’s significance to culture, even to developments that are already described in history books, might fade in the light of future discoveries.

### **3.6 Future: From Judgment to Openness.**

How to proceed? Let us call the positive, affirmative response the “Mozart effect,” and try to make it most productive. A radical affirmation of the present and an acceptance of the openness of the future requires to move beyond the omnipresent assumption that Mozart was an undeniably real prodigy. Instead of repeating the historical trope, an affirmation of the present may start from the idea that all twenty-three videos presented in chapter two, without compromise or reservations, provide us real, complete and authentic prodigy performances. They should not be approached in degrees of more and less, but in terms of *qualitative* variations of prodigious performance. Given the emphasis on the supra-individual, and requirement of (some form of perceivable) achievement, there is little relevance to addressing prodigies as a distinct category of being. The videos in chapter two, just like the written sources in chapter one, show *manifestations* of the prodigy phenomenon. The specific commonality and diversity of their (expressions of) ‘prodigiousness’ can now be made productive terms of qualitative *differing*, which is a significant move ahead compared to the quantitative discussion of degrees of which we have seen much.

Furthermore, let us affirm prodigies’ as *active* subjects of their own performance, and let us consider more carefully our own, active role as scholars. What I propose is to some extent emphatic to the child-centered perspective on giftedness proposed by Silverman and Miller (2009, 108). Yet, beyond merely foregrounding the lived experience, thoughts, feelings, and



embodied reality of individual prodigies, the idea is to recognize children as “active participants” in the past, present and future (Cf. Baxter 2005). Since the boundaries and direction of movement of domains are indeterminate, and since we do not know the future of the domain, prodigies cannot be unambiguously located in either a forefront, center, or peripheral position in the domain. We cannot even be sure who justly speaks as the experts of a domain.

The future, for Feldman, is the realm of ultimate judgment regarding creative achievement. The future offers a final conclusion about the legitimacy of prodigious promise. Ultimate prodigiousness, or domain-transforming creativity, for him, will only become evident over time, when other professionals acknowledge and appropriate the transformational shift. In Mozart’s case, the future judgment has turned out in his favor, so far. His exceptionality has turned into an undeniable past. Feminist scholars, by contrast, have taken future and futurity as tools with political and theoretical potential to change undesirable relations of inequality of the present. A closer look at one feminist perspective reveals that the underlying conception of creativity is however similar.

Macarthur’s (2010) book *Towards a twenty-first-century politics of music* is distinctly future-oriented. It presents the argument that the tradition of composition in “new” music (i.e. the present continuation of Mozart-like creativity in Western art music) is self-repetitive rather than creative. This absence of creativity, as discussed in chapter two, has a link to capitalism: funding systems compel “entrepreneurial” composers to formulate the future ‘as a development and variation of the present’, thus ‘based on the known and the familiar’ (73). Real “newness” or creativity, for Macarthur, is instead characterized by transformation; it does not leave the system unchanged. She cites Deleuze and Guattari to emphasize this point: ‘great art changes the very nature of the system’ (cited in Macarthur 2010, 73). The resemblance between Macarthur and Feldman’s views on creativity is striking. Despite their very different onto-epistemological starting points,<sup>43</sup> both scholars agree that “real” creativity transforms the rules, boundaries and even the nature of the domain.

There is a further connection between Feldman’s and feminist’s future perspectives. Closer to the feminist-theoretical deployment of the notion of future (i.e. as a potential for social-political change), Feldman (1986) formulates expected and desired changes in prodigy performances of the future. Addressing the expected domains of “future prodigies,” he notes

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<sup>43</sup> Colebrook (2004) adequately describes the difference of “equivocity” versus “university.” The latter entails a resistance against the equivocal split between representation and real.

both computer programming and “feminine”<sup>44</sup> areas of expertise (89). The latter include moral and ethical skills, interpersonal skills including care, concern and sympathy with others, spirituality. Computer programming not only fits the notion of a new and “young” domain, but also fulfills the further requirements of a developmental domain attuned to prodigies (with several stages of accomplishment). The feminine activities likewise fit a timely observation of changing cultural values and emancipator politics in the 1980s. Feldman notes that minority groups have called attention to these qualities and therefore, that they may be expected to gain value in the future. Overall, the (systematic) recognition of prodigies in these areas is complicated by the fact that they provide less clearly defined rules and measures of performance. Yet, they may offer a unique opportunity to discover prodigious performance across a whole range of non-elitist, accessible activities (89-90).<sup>45</sup>

Feldman’s depiction of future domains is problematic for several reasons. The human exceptionalist and cultural evolutionist views, already discussed at length, serve as a basis for the predictions. Briefly put, computer programming can only be understood to be in an “early” stage if one accepts the assumption that all domains move through similar and parallel trajectories of development, whereby music serves as the primary example of a most “mature” domain. There is one more problem. Feldman excludes those domains that do not fit the label of “developmental.” His characterization of developmental domains implies a hierarchy based on class. It separates academic and artistic achievement from “mere labor” activities: ‘manufacturing jobs, bureaucratic tasks, office work, unskilled labor, soldiering, service positions or nondevelopmental domains’ (1986, 86). The latter are not attuned to prodigies because ‘range and variability of achievement are not one of their key features.’ (ibid.).

Following MacArthur’s notion of “newness,” discussed above, it can be argued that Feldman forecloses the discovery of transformative creativity in the non-developmental domains. The exclusion is arbitrary however, because the previous sections have shown that Feldman focuses on coherence and parallel movement (i.e. sameness and repetition) in the higher-regarded domains as well. Attuning to transformative difference, or the very possibility of creativity, would mean to consider that each domain, independently, may draw its own,

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<sup>44</sup> Feldman uses this term.

<sup>45</sup> To cite from Feldman’s (1986) description in more detail: ‘I am thinking domains that emphasize moral and ethical development, realms of human endeavor that involve the understanding of others’ points of view, cooperative enterprise, negotiations, and compromise [...] Spiritual dimensions that focus on the best human qualities of care, concern, charity, peace, and sympathy with others represent underdeveloped capacities in our children, at least insofar as they are recognized as worthy of cultural recognition and reward’ (89-90).

unique trajectory. As suggested before, this is less likely to be a goal-oriented movement than a movement from one kind of chaos to another.

The difference between the positions of MacArthur and Feldman is that while both recognize the changing nature of domains, MacArthur's conceptual apparatus offers more opportunities to assess the nature and location of transformative creativity according to the definition on which both agree. Feldman remains reliant on a logic of the Same by modeling all domains on the majoritan<sup>46</sup> examples of "classical performance" and "new music composition."<sup>47</sup> This is an affirmation of elitist privilege that stands on a sharp edge with the recognition of temporal and cultural specificity at other points. To cite from his article on creativity with Morelock: 'Cultures select and emphasize the value of various domains, thereby constraining who can be conceived as a prodigy *at a particular time*' (2011a, 86; my emphasis). In a more rigorous conceptualization of prodigies' future domains, value- and class-based discrimination would be taken into account. A prodigy's transformative potential, then, would not have been limited to a pre-existing systematic and nature of domains, and the domains, in turn, would not have been limited to the logic of a privileged cultural perspective. More potential can be found in a statement that appears near the end of Feldman's chapter on domains: 'Prodigies are found only where we look for them, and where we care enough about high-level performance in a domain to regard the signs of extraordinariness as somehow critical to the continued well-being of society' (Feldman 1986, 90). Here, Feldman admits that care, ethics and cultural values take part in prodigy performances, and that prodigy performances, in turn, may affect change in society. Let it be a guide for the closing discussion.

### **3.7 Reassembling the Mozart-Effect: Conclusions on Prodigious Performance and the Domain of Music**

Among the most promising insights from early co-incidence theory is the idea that domains are moving assemblages. Domains go through periods of changing standards; periods in which it is much harder to define quality. Feldman states: 'Changes in criteria and periods of

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<sup>46</sup> This is Deleuze and Guattari's (e.g. 1987) term for the privileged position, the seemingly neutral position that sets the standard.

<sup>47</sup> Chess and mathematics are the other two typical prodigy domains. So more accurately put, Feldman privileges a model based on resonances found in these three fields. But most significantly, he does not extend the insight on changing values to the fact that prodigies precisely appear in these three domains.

instability may profoundly affect who will be credited with doing the most important work at a given moment and what the most valued work will be like' (1986, 80). This view resonates with Thomas Kuhn's (1962) notion of "paradigm shifts." Kuhn's philosophy of science has been criticized in several generations of feminist scholarship for not allowing the possibility of multiple paradigms to exist at the same time (e.g. Hekman 2010; Van der Tuin 2011, Haraway 1988; Harding 1986). One way to take to make this critique productive is to read the paradigm with Feldman as an example of a domain: a domain of knowledge production with specific boundaries, symbolic content and rules defining achievement.

The most influential domain in Feldman's work, however, is not the scientific paradigm but the domain of music. Clear definitions of either "music" or "the domain of music" are absent in Feldman's work. The same is true for prodigy research more widely. Up until this point in the current thesis, I have invoked labels such as "classical piano performance" in order to distinguish between various practices within the unspecified "wider domain" of music. In his chapter on domains, however, Feldman keeps the boundaries between classical performance, "new" music, composition and other genres decidedly open. He draws on various interpretations, with their respective boundaries and temporal characteristics wherever they suit the argument. For example, when referring to the structured pedagogies and stable standards of expert performance, he clearly has the contemporary, institutionalized tradition of classical music in mind (1986, 79). In another instance, he draws on the eclectic and unstable state of affairs in "new" music composition to illustrate the "developmental" nature of the domain: 'The past decade or so has seen substantial diversity among music critics in evaluating new works, perhaps more so than at any previous time' (80). It goes without saying that there are endlessly more areas of musical practice than these respectively "stable" and "diverse" subgenres of Western art music. As the assembled prodigies in chapter two show, even in a most rigid and obvious selection, individual prodigies are each situated differently across intersections of musical genres, audiences, cultures, pedagogies, traditions, capitalist forces and family relations.

Even if we follow the assumption, for now, that music constitutes a coherent whole, a mature, complex, and developmental domain, it remains difficult to explain why other domains would follow a similar development, necessarily or "by nature." The inclusion of "feminine" domains is most difficult to fit in this regard, since they lack the similarity of structure. These domains are not "immature" but are rather undervalued at a specific moment in time (Feldman 1986, 89). It follows that they might *already* possess a kind of organization (a "coherent complexity," to use Feldman's terms). This organization is present, yet not

properly understood. Studying such domains may lead to the discovery of prodigies in these fields in the present and future, but also to the (re)discovery of exceptional performers in such fields in the past.

Taking into account prodigies as active subjects of their own performances means to consider not only their active role as performers on stage, but also their activity as listeners, critics, class mates, amateur practitioners, siblings, daughters, dog lovers, and so on. They produce their own domains. They are finding a niche, producing and nourishing their fan base, producing desire in (i.e. motivating) amateur practitioners. This view is decidedly different from Feldman's conclusion on the "risky" but inevitable co-incidence that produced the prodigy Mozart:

At any given moment, there may be talents for which the necessary resources simply do not exist. Even a willingness to relocate anywhere in the world is insufficient when the world is simply without the crucial needed resources. If a talent appears for which there has not yet developed an appropriate cultural expression, knowledge system, technology, symbol system, or the like, no amount of searching will produce them. (2000, 262)

This statement exemplifies the self-imposed limits of current prodigy research: prodigies are explained as a developmental product of interaction between a given nature and a variable environment. Prodigies are a resultant, passive product. They are positioned outside of culture. There is neither a place for them as an active participant in culture as performer or composer, nor as part of the audience. What I propose, instead, is to count prodigies as active participants in their own production. Prodigies might, already during their early prodigious childhood, affect and change the known expressions, the rules, appropriateness, and boundaries of their own domain. *They* are the only legitimate experts of their domain.

The limited view does not only neglect prodigies' active role in the production of culture, it also situates scientific research as radically outside of culture. It assumes that prodigies, in the past or present, exist (or not) in a complete disconnection from scientific statements. This is not only incorrect from the point of view of cultural theory, but it also contradicts a basic principle of the co-incidence framework: adult experts assess and verify performances as prodigious. Next to performing professionals and critics, prodigy researchers are clearly part of this group with authority.<sup>48</sup> Feldman and Morelock recognize changing judgments: the

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<sup>48</sup> To give one example, CBC Radio Calgary's news program *The Homestretch* (March 13, 2012) reports of Kevin Chen, a seven year old playing grade nine piano repertoire. His teacher Colleen Athparia, who has taught various other prodigies, calls him a 'prodigy of prodigies.' In the next day's episode of the same show, nobody

rules and standards of prodigious achievement in a given domain may change over time (Feldman and Morelock 2011, 263). Already in his reflection on the amusement park ride in 1994, Feldman showed awareness of the embodied and situated conditions under which his theory took shape. He considered the theory itself as a process of co-incidence.

With that in mind, it is a very little step from this developmentalist view to a performative and situated one that acknowledges every act as iterative and productive of the norms in which it operates.<sup>49</sup> It means that there is no need to sit back and accept that some domains, shapes, colors and sizes are simply more welcome to the prodigy phenomenon than others. Is it possible to respond to prodigy performance in a way less forcefully steering towards judgment and recognition? I suggest that prodigy scholars use their capacity to produce new figures in a more conscious manner, by deliberately choosing to privilege certain bodies above others. The child Mozart may remain a powerful figure, but it no longer needs to be invoked systematically as a transcendental and timeless signifier of exceptionality. In Mozart's place, other bodies and other aspects of musical experience could gain more visibility.

As an example, I have shown how Nuron Mukumiy can be seen capable of affecting other bodies, of transcending categories and transforming reality, even at a moment when his future achievements are yet undecided. To account for the quality or degree of exceptionality of Nuron's (or any other prodigy's) performance, then, we may bypass the notion that composition and improvisation are fundamental markers of exceptionality. Even when Mozart's uniqueness is once again the object of study, the relevance of these qualities may be questioned, since their signifiatory power is relative, historically and culturally situated. In other words, if composition and improvisation were and are powerful movements in the historical context, the child Mozart remains—regarding these particular aspects—not more significantly exceptional as an individual body that can be distinguished from his environment. It is only the discursive act<sup>50</sup> of connecting them with Mozart in a written statement that actively reinforces the normative idea that Mozart was and is a unique assemblage.

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less than David Feldman himself is invited as the “prodigy expert” to confirm that indeed, ‘it is the real deal.’ <http://www.cbc.ca/homestretch/episode/2012/03/13/child-prodigy/> (accessed May 26, 2013)

<sup>49</sup> E.g. Butler (1988); Haraway (1988); Barad (2003; 2007).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Butler (1988).

To conclude with a suggestion for further research, creativity and imitation could be understood, in non-hierarchical terms, as distinctive affective capacities of individual bodies. The notion of bodies as assemblages of affective capacities and relations of movement follows the collective turn to Spinoza in new materialist and third wave feminist theory (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010; Gatens 1996, 2009; Cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 256ff).<sup>51</sup> The most-cited insight from this seventeenth-century philosopher is that we do not (yet) know “what a body can do.” This idea precisely captures the kind of modesty I proposed with regard to prodigy research, defining prodigies and formulating future expectations. Thinking of bodies as assemblages offers a way to rethink imitation as the capacity of a body to join in and adapt to an existing movement: a capacity to *be affected*. In this way, imitation no longer has a passive connotation; rather than the product of an external force, it is an affective capacity, and active force that shapes individual bodies.

The individual body produced and productive in Nuron Mukumiy’s performance, to return to the most vivid example, had the *capacity to affect* me with a unique set of relations of movements. Instead of explaining the impact of this experience as a product of external forces (political-economic impulses, involuntary excessive training), I attribute it to the exceptional capacities of Nuron as a young but nonetheless autonomous and authentic human being. Nuron’s *capacity to be affected* has enabled him to successfully perform a fully embodied imitation of an authentic artistic personality that affects me as an “unreal” experience of adult and childlike elements. Instead of affirming the absence of creative skills in comparison to Mozart, I suggest to stay with the question of why the capacity to imitate movement remains valued as less significant than the capacity to create and invent new movement. As I have argued, creativity and imitation can be thought otherwise than in a fixed discursive opposition, which may serve a better understanding of the relation between performance, experience and exceptional bodies in music history.

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<sup>51</sup> The Spinozist body, to elaborate on Gatens’ (1996) reading of Spinoza, is neither a victim of mental domination (in a mind/body dualism) nor machine-like body. Instead, it is productive and creative, and it cannot be “known” because it changes over time. The body has no “truth” or “true nature,” as Gatens argues, because ‘its meanings and capacities will vary according to its context.’ She continues: ‘We do not know the limits of this body or the powers that it is capable of attaining. These limits and capacities can only be revealed by the ongoing interactions of the body and its environment’ (57).

## Conclusion

To rephrase the main research question, this thesis has attempted to deepen, enrich and complicate current understandings of exceptional performance, creativity and the nature of the prodigy phenomenon. The respective themes have been addressed in three chapters, which successively centred on historical, contemporary, and theoretical sources. Drawing a trajectory from past, to present, and future perspectives, findings have been formulated in terms of continuity, divergence, and limitations among (and across) the themes and sources.

The first chapter has shown that both historical and contemporary sources reveal a strikingly homogeneous outlook on the meaning of exceptionality in musical prodigy performances. The name of Mozart functions as a point of reference in reviews, reports, memoirs and advertisements across two centuries. In its most widely used sense, Mozart's name figures as a measure of unrivaled exceptionality. However, rare examples confirm that there are prodigies, such as Felix Mendelssohn or Alma Deutscher, who have successfully equaled and exceeded the norm set by Mozart. They confirm that the Mozart figure, despite its consistency, always already differs from itself. That is, the persistent notion of transcendental status may occasionally be taken away from Mozart in a one-on-one comparison of "prodigy-like" traits. A theoretical intermezzo highlighted the relevance of these irregularities: As an *abstract machine*, the Mozart figure has no fixed essence, but always contains the potential to differ. In its particular association with exceptional performance and transcendental status, furthermore, the Mozart figure has been found to return in prodigy research. Scholarly attempts to address Mozart's exceptionality articulate the traits that are most commonly associated with exceptional performance: the creative skills of composition and improvisation. In an attempt to open up the limitations of this view, I have proposed a turn towards *abilities*, away from achievements and eminence. Even though performance always entails achievements of some kind, this turn is a step towards recognizing that the ultimate judgment about prodigious exceptionality lies in the future. The suspended assessment offers the possibility of actual variation, not only on the level of what will become of prodigies, but also on the level of what marks exceptionality.

Going deeper into the most convincing aspect of Mozart's exceptionality, the second chapter explored prodigy performances in terms of creativity. Whereas Mozart-like composition and improvisation are widely considered to be the most *significant* qualities from



a conventional aesthetic perspective on creativity, I have suggested that prodigies may be creative in ways yet to be discovered. With particular focus on audience experience and popularity, I have explored prodigiousness in terms of the *capacity to amaze*. Contemporary traces of prodigy performances have been collected on YouTube. The analysis of video data has revealed that the Mozart figure remains a powerful force in prodigy performances. Self-reflective comments reveal that practicing amateurs form an important audience group whose voice has not been given much attention in prodigy research as yet. In user comments, furthermore, a most-discussed topic is Asianness. I have argued that Asianness, as an onto-epistemological manifestation of race, variably restricts or heightens prodigies' capacity to amaze depending on the video and prodigy in question. Other issues that affect the capacity to amaze are commercialism and genre, or domain. The question of prodigious creativity, eventually, has drawn attention to the constitutive encounter between individual and domain, a theme further addressed in the final chapter.

The perspective of the future has served as third entry point to address prodigies, specifically the “nature” of prodigies as a relation between nature and culture, inside and outside, individual and domain. In a close reading of co-incidence theory, I have argued that Feldman offers a promising outlook on individuality and temporality even though cultural evolutionism, progress narratives, and human exceptionalism mark his work. The primary consequence of these most-criticized symptoms of modern thought is that prodigies cannot properly be conceived as active subjects of their own performance. Prodigies are not seen as mature, fully conscious and active contributors to culture. The experts, or those who define the standards of the domain, have up until now been depicted as an unnamed group of adult others. Prodigies have never actually been understood as fully entitled performers on an adult professional level. A theory on the nature of prodigies, I have claimed, should at least consider the possibility that prodigies themselves contribute and shape the boundaries of their own domain, or domains.

To sum up the findings in a brief recommendation for further research, this thesis sets the figure of Mozart, the phenomenon of Asianness, and the notion of individuality on top of the agenda of prodigy research. Although traditionally located at a position of teleological origin, Mozart is by no means the only name that repeatedly returns in prodigy performances. A study of the workings of a more timely figure, such as Justin Bieber, would offer a most relevant continuation. It not only complies to the radical engagement with the present (or the moment of performance) proposed in this thesis, but also it would enrich the discussions of online environments, commercialism and the phenomenon of launching a career from one's

living room. The second topic of Asianness has only been touched on very briefly in this thesis. Among the most urging questions left to be addressed are: How does Asianness return in historical sources? How do user comments invoking Asianness relate to the wider practice of posting derogatory messages on online social media, known as “trolling”? How do the effects of Asianness in prodigy performances relate to and differ from other phenomena of race? The third theme of individuality provides a starting point to introduce the prodigy phenomenon into posthuman and posthumanist debates.<sup>1</sup> I have already invoked some theoretical perspectives from this field (which largely overlaps with new materialist theory) to enrich the discussions of exceptionality, creativity, race, gender, and composition. Yet, an actual conversation with this field has yet to take place. This could entail a close reading of the source material to further address the audiovisual, physical (e.g. gestural) and spatial specificity of prodigious individuality, or a further inquiry into ethics, desire, voluntariness and pleasure.

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<sup>1</sup> The posthuman is a central theme in third wave feminist and new materialist studies. “Posthumanities” refers to the transdisciplinary field of research in which scientists, social scientists and humanities scholars meet around a shared interest in phenomena that challenge the distinctiveness of the category of “human” (e.g. Barad 2003; Wolfe 2009; Braidotti 2013).

## List of Figures

Fig. 1. Screenshots. 'Musical Prodigy: Mini-Mozart Alma Deutscher Composes Own Opera at Age Seven.' ABC News 2012. <http://youtu.be/3usTOsRyGBg> (accessed May 26, 2013)

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## **Appendix A**

Table 1. Video and Source Description

Table 2. Prodigies and Performance Details

Table 3. Audience Response

Table 1. Video and Source Description

Name	Video Title	Date added	Duration	URL (accessed April 23, 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	<a href="http://youtu.be/iRrlhKVq2Fk">http://youtu.be/iRrlhKVq2Fk</a>
2 Bear, Emily	The Next Mozart? 6-Year Old Piano Prodigy Wows All	May 15, 2008	4:20	<a href="http://youtu.be/vUx4t4W4eVY">http://youtu.be/vUx4t4W4eVY</a>
3 Bortnick, Ethan	Piano Prodigy	May 18, 2007	4:31	<a href="http://youtu.be/MnTKaFPxyo0">http://youtu.be/MnTKaFPxyo0</a>
4 Camara, Akim	Andre Rieu & 3 year old violinist, Akim Camara 2005	October 17, 2008	9:59	<a href="http://youtu.be/JN2SQ4m7M04">http://youtu.be/JN2SQ4m7M04</a>
5 Deutscher, Alma	Alma Deutscher (aged 6) playing Seitz, violin concerto no. 3 (Keshet Eilon, 2011).	December 31, 2011	5:31	<a href="http://youtu.be/Y2rGpAK6nRQ">http://youtu.be/Y2rGpAK6nRQ</a>
6 Ehrenfried, Mark	Mark Ehrenfried - German Young-Pianist. "Rhapsody In Rock"	August 28, 2010	1:29	<a href="http://youtu.be/NFvawxRsFz4">http://youtu.be/NFvawxRsFz4</a>
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	<a href="http://youtu.be/njG_dQC-cnk">http://youtu.be/njG_dQC-cnk</a>
8 Garrett, Umi	Umi Garrett, 8 yr. Old - Liszt Gnomenreigen	February 22, 2009	3:21	<a href="http://youtu.be/sYQB_EIdC70">http://youtu.be/sYQB_EIdC70</a>
9 George, Gavin	Awe-Inspiring 9-Yr-Old Piano Prodigy	August 1, 2012	7:00	<a href="http://youtu.be/aaakFH8JIYU">http://youtu.be/aaakFH8JIYU</a>
10 Hoffman, Richard	3-year Old Piano Prodigy Richard Hoffmann	October 24, 2008	2:43	<a href="http://youtu.be/9Ygzf709CmI">http://youtu.be/9Ygzf709CmI</a>
11 Kahane, Brianna	Incredible 7-Year Old Child Violinist Brianna Kahane Performs "Csardas" on a 1/4-Size violin	January 18, 2010	5:47	<a href="http://youtu.be/GEOZ31HeZT4">http://youtu.be/GEOZ31HeZT4</a>
12 Koffi, Yannick	10 year old Yannick Koffi plays Soul Intro- The Chicken by Jaco Pastorius	October 9, 2009	3:26	<a href="http://youtu.be/_kFT0LLRRBo">http://youtu.be/_kFT0LLRRBo</a>
13 Koo, Tiffany	Tiffany Koo (Age 5) - Chopin Nocturne #20 C Sharp Minor	December 18, 2007	4:01	<a href="http://youtu.be/Oc15dAe_o-4">http://youtu.be/Oc15dAe_o-4</a>
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	<a href="http://youtu.be/RnVNZ413yfe">http://youtu.be/RnVNZ413yfe</a>
15 Levanon, Yoav	Yoav Levanon (7) at Carnegie - Impromptu in A flat major, Op.29, Chopin	April 25, 2011	5:04	<a href="http://youtu.be/Fus_YMB2k4k">http://youtu.be/Fus_YMB2k4k</a>
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	<a href="http://youtu.be/gIEE5Kk9Dqs">http://youtu.be/gIEE5Kk9Dqs</a>
17 Okseniuk, Jonathan	3 year old Jonathan conducting to the 4th movement of Beethoven's 5th Symphony	March 15, 2010	4:29	<a href="http://youtu.be/OREJ-ICGiKU">http://youtu.be/OREJ-ICGiKU</a>
18 Paddler16*	Pianist (5 year old Japanese girl):Bach Gigue	February 4, 2007	2:33	<a href="http://youtu.be/bI_xx82oTO8">http://youtu.be/bI_xx82oTO8</a>
19 Paul, Malaki	Malaki Paul Uncut [HD] - Britains got talent 2012 (auditions)	April 28, 2012	7:14	<a href="http://youtu.be/txPQC8NB_-M">http://youtu.be/txPQC8NB_-M</a>
20 Rockaz0*	Little Boy Drumming	July 7, 2010	1:34	<a href="http://youtu.be/nByWAVEYhhI">http://youtu.be/nByWAVEYhhI</a>
21 Thehypnoguy1*	North Korea children playing the guitar. Creepy as hell.	May 3, 2011	3:29	<a href="http://youtu.be/gSedE5sU3uc">http://youtu.be/gSedE5sU3uc</a>
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	<a href="http://youtu.be/imGD8UsZxu8">http://youtu.be/imGD8UsZxu8</a>
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	<a href="http://youtu.be/e3oNVmSaMsE">http://youtu.be/e3oNVmSaMsE</a>

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

Note: For convenient access to these sources, a playlist has been created. Search for 'Survey of Musical Prodigies' on YouTube or follow the link below:

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLD3rJspnrgriGmQGCgU9frsZUFx00DK2v> (accessed May 26, 2013)

Table 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

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

Table 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	35430	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	28883	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	10714	97	3	5
Paddler16	6.607.371	16.509	1.140	15882	94	6	5
Tsung, Tsung	4.621.077	39.923	895	10.080	98	2	11
Hoffman, Richard	3.997.892	5.375	584	3821	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	2190	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 April 23, 2013

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

Note: 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.

## Appendix B

### 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 U.S. 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 our 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 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)

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 too 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!!!!(Crazyovermozart)

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 Fantaisie 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 (Coookiemonsterrrrr)

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 Fantasie 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) (Senapinmozart)

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) (Senapinmozart)

### **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. (Iraïiner)

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. (Travillons)

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 (גרוסמן יאיר) [Yaya70100])

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)

### **Mukumi, 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)

### **Okseniuk, 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... amazinggggg (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 necessarily [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 C

### 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 thoooouusand 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: *Wheeeeeee*

Piano: Daym

Dad: [whispers] 7000 points

*Source:* [http://www.reddit.com/r/Music/comments/zmogj/i\\_think\\_he\\_said\\_he\\_was\\_four/](http://www.reddit.com/r/Music/comments/zmogj/i_think_he_said_he_was_four/)

(accessed May 26, 2013)