

## **Prodigies within the Virtual Stage of YouTube**

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This report of a sample study of 23 musical prodigy videos on YouTube aims to demonstrate that the musical prodigy is an interesting figure and topic of research, because it articulates the exception from a norm, the exception among exceptions, and the distinction between “meaningful” and “irrelevant” deviation from a norm. YouTube offers a compelling, rich and particularly suitable resource for the study of musical prodigies, musical performance, and cultural territories in the present.

A *prodigy*, in this study, is defined as a child younger than 10, who is able to amaze an audience through an astonishing display of virtuosity and/or musicality. The *stage* is a technical, material-discursive set of conditions that co-shapes performance. In this research, the stage is a tool for cross-historical comparison, whereby the 19<sup>th</sup>-century concert hall is a stage as much as the platform of YouTube is. These stages are no passive circumstances but material-technological and situational forces that co-produce performance. Both have an important role in the cuts that are made in performance, between prodigy and listener, human and nonhuman, music and ‘noise’.

De Mink’s (2013) master thesis explores the past, present and future conditions under which musical prodigies amaze their audiences with the interdisciplinary toolkit of feminist-informed “new materialism.” This paper presents key findings from the second chapter, entitled “How are prodigies creative? A survey of musical prodigies on YouTube.” The chapter is currently being reworked for an OUP essay collection on musical prodigies with Gary McPherson. The chapter develops a notion of “Prodigious” creativity, which forms an alternative to “Mozart-like” creativity. The latter, as elaborated in the first chapter of de Mink’s thesis, captures the traditional view that creativity in music typically happens in composition and improvisation, as opposed to the ‘mere’ performance of existing works. More recent debates on creativity in giftedness and prodigy studies show a wider focus and look for a way to address the specificity of creative practice in the case of musical prodigies. For this study, the following suggestion of Feldman and Morelock (2011: 264) from their entry on prodigies in the Encyclopedia of Creativity is taken as a starting point:

“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.”

The study is most concerned with the aspects that make a performance ‘unusual and distinctively appropriate enough to be labeled “creative”’, and in fact to qualify as a “prodigy” in the first place. Not sharing the restriction of focus on a “sophisticated” audience, this exploration of prodigious creativity highlights the diversity of the entire YouTube-watching population. Two research questions guide the exploration: 1) How has the virtual stage of YouTube changed the conditions under which musical prodigies perform? And 2) how do prodigies succeed to amaze their audiences in the present?

### **Approach**

To study music performance as event and experience, following the feminist-informed “new materialist” approach of de Mink’s (2013) master thesis, means to focus on how exceptional performance comes into being via social and individual, human and technological, biological and cultural “intra-actions” across time and space. Is decidedly not the same as passive and/or individual audience experience, even though the audience responses are taken as a starting point.

Created & launched in 2005, YouTube has become the single largest resource for viewing the talents of musicians of all kinds. It is the fastest growing and most internationally accessible resource available to showcase and witness the perceived or actually exceptional abilities of young musicians. YouTube serves as the stage of prodigies in the present, a stage that is characteristic of our time. It reflects key changes in the consumption and production of musical performance, across two centuries.

YouTube is distinctive for its 1) unprecedented audience sizes (up to 25 million viewers for a single video in this sample), 2) audio-visual record of performance (temporal split between production and consumption, pause/replay options), 3) archival function and 4) audience participation tools (option to “like” leave written comments). To this extent, YouTube grants a more active role to the listener than the traditional concert stage, and puts lesser constraints on time and place. Nevertheless, hardly 1% of viewers actually use the opportunity to interact, so a largely passive audience remains. Finally 5) the clustering of performances through “suggested videos” links leads to a characteristic experience whereby any viewer is likely to encounter a relatively limited set of highly popular videos within the prodigy niche.

The sampling method is a smaller scale and qualitative variation on Burgess & Green’s (2009) survey of 4000+ most popular YouTube videos over a set period of time. As a tool to study culture from a media studies perspective, the survey does not only serve to map the general cultural domain of YouTube, but also can be used for ‘identifying controversies and mapping aesthetic characteristics across particular cultural forms’ (Burgess and Green 2009: 10). The sample for this project is

considerably smaller with 23 videos, yet rightly sized to illustrate the commonalities and variations across the “niche” or subculture of musical prodigy videos. The sample offers a middle way between individual case studies and large scale quantitative analysis that rightly fits and comes closest to the reality of experience when watching YouTube videos: not one at the time in much detail, but several in a row, with many choices competing for attention.

Videos have been collected during semi-structured searches over three years. I used video searches on terms prodigy and musical prodigy in 8 languages, “suggested videos” browsing, and followed links & recommendations from other sites. The final selection is based on following criteria: 1) The musician must be (claimed to be) *younger than ten* at age of recording (following definitions), 2) Only one video per prodigy can be included. This selection takes the one with the *highest number of views* per given individual. 3) The performance shows a quality and level of performance that exceeds the expected level at the given age. This is either an adult professional level or the *promise of reaching* such level, the latter being more suitable for the very young prodigies. 4) The performance resonates with aspects of the Mozart-figure & prodigy profile (biographic, repertoire, audience size).<sup>1</sup>

Note that the qualitative criteria make classical music and piano performance into privileged domains for this study. Furthermore, this sample of the prodigy “niche” requires cuts that do not reflect the viewing experience: the browsing easily leads to other domain prodigies, less impressive performers, “fake” prodigies<sup>2</sup> and massive neighbour-genres including TV talent shows and competitions. Including the more contested “potential prodigies” is a very effective way of positioning the niche.

Data has been collected in three tables with collected video and source descriptions, prodigy and performance details, and audience response data. Next to that, the thesis and upcoming chapter provide an appendix with selected written user comments per video, and a link to a YouTube playlist that contains all 23 videos (search on: “a survey of musical prodigies”). The videos are all uploaded between 2007-2012; Prodigies are ages between 3 and 10 years old, they come from 12 countries and perform 7 instruments (that is instruments, voice and conducting). Key themes discussed in written comments (in no particular order) are: praise and admiration, the Child Prodigy Mozart, Comparison to viewer’s own skills, commercialism, concern about “normal childhood”, and “Asianness”.

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<sup>1</sup> See de Mink (2013)’s thesis, chapter one, for a discussion of the historical sources and theoretical framework connecting the Mozart figure and prodigy profile.

<sup>2</sup> Browsing sessions guided by the musical prodigy search query led to occasional “fake” results, such as 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 viewing statistics, sources and history of this video reveal that the video went “viral” through its title similarity that made it show up in the “suggested videos” list of the top prodigy video of Emily Bear (included in this survey). Accordingly, the high number of 800k views can be explained through the fact that one only discovers the dissatisfactory content after clicking, which already adds another single view to the video’s total number of views and popularity ranking. Source: <http://youtu.be/N4C2SQEJXGs> (accessed May 26, 2013)

### **A comparison across two centuries**

The following discussion of results aims to answer the research questions posed above. To restate the first: How has the virtual stage of YouTube changed the conditions under which musical prodigies perform?

Using the historical and scientific sources from the first chapter of my thesis, I've compared prodigy performances across two centuries, and the short conclusion is that the young Mozart remains a dominant point of reference for prodigy performances, to the extent that it defines what counts as a real and truly exceptional prodigy. At the same time, increasingly varied conditions shape prodigy performances in the present. Consider changes at the levels of performance settings, audience response, and audience experience. Performance settings, first of all, now include various TV formats and the Private home, on top of the still common traditional concert hall. Settings impact the capacity to amaze in differing degrees: A TV show is a less accessible channel of publicity than a private home, it works as an external source of validation that this is indeed a true prodigy. Secondly, critics now discuss Asianness and Commercialism alongside "normal childhood", which was already a concern in the past. Thirdly, the virtual stage now stimulates immediate comparison to other prodigies, and to the same prodigy at younger or older age. The suspense and excitement about "what will become of this child" is radically shortened for those prodigies who have a biographical channel.

### **The Normal Childhood Narrative in 10 videos**

To address the second research question, the remaining part of this paper elaborates on one way in which prodigies succeed and fail to amaze their audiences under the new cultural conditions of the present stage of YouTube: the "normal childhood" narrative.

Gavin George's TV documentary video first establishes the child as a prodigy. After hardly 10 seconds, the notion of a normal and happy childhood appears. Gavin is shown playing with his brother, eating ice cream and reading a book amidst his toys. We learn that "he likes Starwars, he likes lego, ... he is such a real kid" (0:15-0:18), and finally see the incredibly cheerful face behind the voice of the kids to close the documentary's prologue. Ethan Borthnick's video opens with a strikingly similarity. This time, we see the "normal child" possibly more explicit, now as a way to heighten the "twist" of him being a prodigy. The video of Emily Bear plays out with a slight variation. The first full 3 minutes emphasize her prodigious achievements and focus on a piano room. Only after that, the first reference to a "normal childhood" appears when the voice-over remarks that "...it's easy to forget that Emily *is* still a child" (3:19-3:24).

The excerpts shown of Gavin George's, Ethan Borthnick's and Emily Bear's TV documentary videos illustrate how the normal childhood heightens the prodigy's capacity to amaze by way of contrast, suspense, and normalizing or humanizing the exceptional prodigy. Also and importantly, the narrative lessens any possible concerns about involuntary practice. This, I argue, contributes to the capacity to

amaze because it's that uncomfortable, double bind of amazement and concern that makes some listeners hesitant to be totally enthusiastic about a prodigy performance.

The next examples show how the normal childhood narrative plays out very differently in videos that resonate with "Asianness", which means any reference to different standards and norms of child raising in Asian culture.

In a similar TV documentary setting that lacks the playground vocabulary, Richard Hoffman amazes his audience only as long as he passes for white. When his looks and especially the looks of his mother reveals Asian roots the YouTube commenters feel "tricked": "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)." For the 5-year-old drummer boy from Singapore, known only under his user name "Rockaz0", a similar scenario. These videos show that "Asian" prodigies have a harder time to amaze their audience, as audiences struggle to rhyme "normal childhood" with "Asian."

Following a smooth delivery of "Flight of The Bumblebee" on "Australia's got Talent", jury member Kyle Sandilands confronts the seven-year-old Shuan Hern Lee 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)

The jury member expresses the classic white authority's worry about involuntary practice, in what may seem a harmless mocking of the stereotype. He poses the question of being forced and yet he does not really pose it. The phrasing does not really allow "no" for an answer. The first, blunt question is swiftly rephrased in a series of even less tactful questions, which all steer towards only one desirable and acceptable answer: "Yes I like it, I like it myself." Rather than a sincere interest in the nurturing and supportive conditions under which Lee reached his level of pianistic virtuosity, this jury member's questions seem to be motivated by a concern about his own human decency.

We might even consider whether there would be any way that the child might have been allowed to provide a different answer such as: “Yes, I am forced against my will.” Such a response would not only have unforeseeable consequences regarding the relation to his family, but 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 the receiving end of the encounter.

Two more examples show the phenomenon of concern in more videos: The performance of the 5-year-old Japanese may be impressive but “must be” a result of over-ambitious parenting, according to the commenter who writes: “This child is five years old and being forced to play this song”. The 8-years-old girl pianist from Japan known under user name ‘kabubu’ receives an even more explicit claim: “She’ll get a beating if she screws up.”

Now that we know how the absence and presence of a normal childhood narrative and asianness plays out, we can explain witness the exception that confirms the rule.

The truly joyful Tsung Tsung, from Hong Kong, then, is something to be genuinely amazed about, as it will be very hard to maintain any suspicion of forced practice in the presented scene. This is confirmed by the fact that Ellen Degeneres invites him to her popular American talkshow, The Ellen Show. On the show, Tsung receives the “real prodigy” and “normal childhood” credentials by telling her first of all, that he likes Mozart and wants to be like him, and secondly, that like a normal kid, he dreams of having a dog (and already has a name for it). Whether the TV show debut managed to sustain the truly joyful Tsung is a questionable however. As the Huffington Post (November 8, 2012) remarks “[...]Tsung Tsung was noticeably less smiley [on the Ellen Show] than he was when we first fell in love [i.e. on the private home video]”.

How do prodigies continue to amaze their audience in the present? They show Mozart-like traits of creativity, use a “normal childhood” narrative, and have an advantage as long as they do not show visual or other references to being Asian.

## References

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## Videos

The playlist with links to all videos discussed in this paper, is available under <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLD3rJspnrgriGmQGCgU9frsZUfX00DK2v>. See also de Mink’s (2013), Tables 1-3.

*Freya M. de Mink completed a research M.A. in Musicology at Utrecht University and visited the Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice during a 6-month research traineeship in 2012. One chapter of her thesis is currently being reworked for publication in Musical Prodigies: Interpretations from psychology, music education, musicology, and ethnomusicology, edited and co-authored by Gary McPherson (Oxford University Press, upcoming).*