

The Musical Brain Conference 2014

Mozart and the Power of Music: Memory, Myth & Magic

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TRANSCRIPT

Prodigy to Genius: Nature or Nurture – Stephen Johnson with Prof. Jane Ginsborg and Prof. Michael Trimble

IAN RITCHIE: Welcome to this next session, picking up on what Stephen Johnson introduced the day with really, which is this whole question of the relationship of prodigy and genius, nature or nurture. Stephen, it will be over to you, but with Jane Ginsborg and Michael Trimble chipping in as and when, and then after this session, we have a panel discussion when there will be more opportunity for opening up the floor for further discussion.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Yes, I was expecting a few more indignant responses to the things I said this morning, although I hope I made it absolutely clear that I do come at it as a person who loves Mozart's music and thinks he produced some of the most glorious works of art of any kind ever. There have been occasions in my life where I have had cause to be grateful, I think, to Mozart, as I am sure many people have, for the effect that his music has. I have just had the strangest experience this afternoon listening to the sounds of the sonification of the seizure, it made me feel rather strange. I wonder if some of you felt the same? I went outside and sat in a chair and imagined the slow movement of the clarinet quintet and actually it didn't half help, it was extraordinary! I'm not exaggerating. Heavy breathing and thinking of the sound of the clarinet quintet was remarkably restorative and so unless I suddenly become incoherent, it seems the Mozart Effect in this case has been very, very positive indeed.

I wanted to go back to one thing I talked about, and the feat of memory, which is often brought up about Mozart and the *Miserere*. In case you weren't clear what I was trying to say, we could have a bit of musical illustration, also by way of just having some music. The *Miserere* of Allegri is an extremely beautiful piece and fully deserves its fame, but it's quite simple, in that a lot of it is fairly straightforward word setting of the kind you get also in Anglican psalm singing where you have a chord and you sing the first line: the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, that kind of thing. So if Mozart had the text in front of him or if, as a good Catholic, he knew it off by heart, then he would be able to reconstruct an enormous amount of the *Miserere* just from memory of the words. Basically this piece is formed of one section, which is in two parts, and is heard five times in the course of the piece. I thought I would just give you the first section, so that we know what we're talking about. Could we have the beginning of the *Miserere*, please?

[Music played.]

All right, one of the reasons I put it on was so we could hear that glorious treble part which Mozart himself, I think, would have been thoroughly proud of. The point I wanted to make is that that is actually pretty simple and there are quite a lot of people here who, if you heard that five times, would be able to make a pretty good stab at writing it out from memory, and

I'm reasonably sure I could, but then I've been trained over a very long period in writing down what I hear, so I know how to do that, more or less. I'm sure there are quite a few of you who couldn't do that mechanical trick, who nevertheless would probably be able to recreate the sounds of the piece in your head and, with the right kind of training, would have been able to do this phenomenal miraculous trick that is attributed to Mozart. It is something of interest to me that, when people are put on a pedestal, even their most ordinary sayings and deeds suddenly become symptomatic of supernatural greatness. I remember reading an interview with the talented Tom Adès, who has a cult around here, and somebody said, a car horn went and I said F sharp, what a genius! Anybody with good pitch could do that and Tom was probably sensible enough to know that his interviewer couldn't verify whether it was an F sharp or not! But that's the kind of thing that happens. You see people report quotations from Wagner in awe and you think, really, it's an indication of just how sometimes the intoxication of being around someone of that high standard can sometimes create the idea that almost everything they do or touch has some special significance.

As I've said, I really don't want to give the impression that I'm running down Mozart here because I think his achievement is phenomenal. It is tragic to consider that he may well have gone on developing. What he might have achieved if he had another five years is pretty extraordinary to think, but as I said also, I think you can see him developing fairly steadily throughout his career, enriching. I talked about that early mass in which most of the handwriting is Leopold's, when you get to *Mitridate*, you can see a little bit of Leopold's writing filling in the places, writing uninspired bits, chug chug, but later, you can see Mozart's handwriting taking over almost exclusively and it starts to become accomplished and then round about 18, it starts to become more than accomplished and you start to see imagination. I mentioned the opera *Il re pastore*, partly because it is fresh. I saw it in Verbier earlier this year, it was a delight to listen to it and think, this is a composer on the cusp of genius. He retreats occasionally back into the remarkable accomplishment he has built up at this stage and then you see him able to let his imagination go, in the first entry of the tyrant, these mocking figures on the woodwind in the background and you think, yes, that's the idea you get in *Don Giovanni*, in the catalogue aria. He thinks it will cheer her up to know she is not the only one, in Spain there are 103, there you are, you have no reason to be particularly sad about that, and all the time in the background you can hear these little woodwind scales going up and down, and there's Mozart writing laughter gently into the background. There are all sorts of extraordinary subtleties, later on, in *Don Giovanni*, where the things are going quite comically and then suddenly in come Donna Anna and Donna Ottavio and the subject goes towards justice. There is a swing towards D major, and for a moment you hear trumpets and drums, which we haven't heard for a long time, just that touch of sound makes one think of the forces of right which are at work behind this, and there in *Il re pastore* you can see the first examples of this.

As I said, later on you can see him, after he makes that great existential leap and leaves the service of the archbishop of Salzburg, who tragically was a man of the enlightenment, but not when it came to music. You see Mozart into the next opera about the flight of a tyrant and it was interesting in how it develops his powers of melody, expressive melody, melody that tells stories. I mention his excitement at discovering Haydn's quartet which lead to his Haydn quartets. There are sketches, abandoned moments and correction. You don't often see that in Mozart. He really wants to get this right, he senses Haydn has done something important and he must learn from it. Having learned from Haydn, having written six quartets like Haydn, he

looks at comic opera, where all the innovation is and the driving force is, away from the formality of opera and tragic opera into something more exploratory, off the cuff and spontaneous. He takes what he has learned from Haydn's string quartets and applies that to the idea of exchange on the stage, comedy. The result is the incredible finale of Act 2 of *Figaro*, where you almost see the drama happening before you in real time. How is it that a sequence of intense forwards and backwards dialogue between, at one point, six people, seven when the gardener comes in, if you were to take the words out, and rescore it for say a violin and orchestra, it would make a perfectly plausible piece of music in its own right. That is absolute extraordinary. It is entirely satisfying as music and yet the moment you add the opera, the dimension of the words and stage, suddenly something else happens to this music. That is achievement well beyond words or any conventional words of praise. And he goes on developing. You can see this intensifying the expression, something Mozart does.

People often use the word "perfection" to describe Mozart but I think it is a very different sort of perfection from the kind you may find in Bach for instance, where everything is magnificently orderly. John Eliot Gardiner suggests that the extraordinary sublime transcendence which Bach created is not there in his earliest works which is a reflection of the fact that he lived in terrified and disorderly times when Germany had been shattered by the experience of the Thirty Years War, and there was a very strong sense of amnesia, wanting to forget the terrible times but at the same time trying to reconnect. Bach's cycle of cantatas is connected with the seasons in the same way. What you find in Mozart, particularly in his latest works, is an extraordinary ability to combine order and perfection with ambiguity. I don't know if you know the String Quartet in G minor but the finale begins with a slow introduction that is positively heart-breaking, one of the most moving pieces of instrumental music I know, after a particularly traumatic slow movement. In the music from the classical period and for some time afterwards, melodies tend to be divided into what are antecedents or questions and answers, so you get as in *Land of Hope and Glory*, da, da, da-di-da, pom, pom, the answer brings you back to earth. A sense of harmonic something left open in the first phrase to a certain extent is solved in the next one. Mozart does the most extraordinary thing in the finale of this, he has three phrases, one of which is clearly the question, the third of question is clearly the answer, the middle one you think it is the answer to the question and then it turns out to be the question to the answer! This is very difficult to convey, but it is such an extraordinary subtle use of ambiguity.

You can tell the string quartet is particularly stimulating, the opening of the C major quintet, it goes Bo, bom, bo, da, da. It is in five-bar phrases and when you get people to sing it back, they try to do what most classical music does and sing it in four-bar phrases but they come unstuck. It is music that sounds simple, there is nothing subversive or changing about it but the moment you try to engage with it in any other way than passively listening to it, you realise it is full of the most extraordinary complexities, almost like one of Max Esher's drawings of staircases that go up and up and up and down to the beginning again. That kind of thing you find in Mozart particularly, it goes on developing even in his last year, but I'm not sure about the opera *Clemenza di Tito*. I had an argument about that. Around about the same time we have things like the clarinet concerto and the piano concerto. There is one of these phrases in Mozart that is exquisitely happy [*plays piano*] like that, and you think this is wonderful, it is B flat major. Then the next time you hear it, you get this and then the bass is playing B flat minor and it is so gorgeously scored and it is so elegantly achieved that on the surface, if you are just listening in the background, you might not notice it except for the

possible feeling that something has just run over a bump. If you are playing it or involved with it or listening more closely, it is a moment when there is an excruciating dissonance, which is very nearly sounded, but not quite. The ear connects up that dissonance and the notes and you get the feeling - well, I remember that line in *The Winter's Tale*, where Leontes says, "This heart dances but not for joy." Mozart can convey that very powerfully to me. One of the things he's able to suggest extraordinarily is a sense of dark troubles underneath a smiling surface, not always by any means, but he can do that remarkably well. There is a brilliant example of just how he does it, plants one little beautifully timed dissonance element in the music, and you know that actually not all is right here. There is that question of extraordinariness of the Requiem, I wish I had brought it along, the Lachrymose, so I could play it to the moment where Mozart starts and you can wonder to yourself about the music that follows. Every time I hear it I can't get my head around the fact I'm not listening to Mozart. I'm 98% certain not listening to Mozart. It has that quality. It seems the magnetism and the suggestion of the man, make it possible for one man to enter into his world and do his job remarkably well.

How does Mozart compare with other prodigies, this is the interesting thing. I must say I found something very, very touching with seeing Derek Paravicini earlier. I have seen his stuff before. At the same time there is a curious, sad feeling for me associated with this music. I wonder if some of his music is shared because there is a delight in seeing someone so damaged able to do something so gloriously creative and give himself such pleasure. But I wouldn't want to hear him do one of the more emotional pieces of Chopin or indeed one of the subtler pieces by Mozart. There is a feeling that something isn't quite there, it seems to me, from listening to it. I sometimes felt this listening to certain very young musicians who are held up as examples of wonderful, fully finished prodigies. I was very angry indeed with a famous violinist for describing Sarah Chang as a perfectly formed violinist in every respect at 12. No, actually, in the next ten years she found the emotional depth and subtlety to be able to realise what he said. There is a tendency sometimes amongst musicians to idealise the technical and accomplished and performance side at the expense of the deeper considerations that make music making so important, which Mozart embodies increasingly as he gets older. There are phenomenal examples, like Mendelssohn I mentioned. He had the ultimate hot house environment when it came to being brought up. His mother was one of those who wanted her son to be an achiever. I think she was the ultimate pushy mother. There were stories about if she heard laughter or merrymaking in the house, she used to call out, "Felix are you doing nothing?" Yet he developed into a composer. There is a tendency with Mendelssohn to play down some of his later works because his earlier works are so extraordinary but the fact is he did go on producing remarkable and wonderful pieces in later life, like the Violin Concerto, the one string Quartet in F minor, they are great works but not much more impressive to what he was writing at 16, 17, 18. At 16 he writes the octet, and at 17 the Midsummer Night's Dream, which was an astonishing work with the power of suggestion. At 18, having just heard one of Beethoven's late quartets, the A minor quartet, which was only just being heard for the first time, he writes one of the greatest post Beethoven string quartets in his own A minor string quartet, a work that clearly pays tribute to Beethoven, but which is as original as any string quartet written in the 19th century. There is an example of a truly remarkable genius.

There is something a bit more slap dash about early Schubert, he's not aesthetically accomplished as Mendelssohn, and yet sometimes he scores fantastic hits, like the *Spinrade*

or the song *Erkönig*, written when he was not quite 18. There are other phenomenal answers. There is the story of Shostakovich, just 18, timorously leaving the score of his 18th quartet on his teacher's desk and running away in case his teacher's reaction isn't favourable, but within a year it is in the repertory of seven international orchestras. And what about the examples of Benjamin Brittan? We are turning up pieces that he didn't think worthy of attention but are phenomenal achievements. They have an astonishing emotional depth, which making you wonder where that came from. Presumably we will go on seeing prodigies in other forms like this, but I think it is important to take a step back from this, and not to make too much of the prodigy side of Mozart. He wasn't, in some respects, the ultimate prodigy. In terms of fabulous gifts he wasn't, as I said, anywhere near Alexander Glazunov and plenty of other stories of Glazunov's ability to reconstruct from memory. The most important thing with Mozart is that, having gone through that process which actually might have killed a lot of talents, that kind of hot-house development can be fatal to an awful lot of sensitive early minds, he went on developing and developing and developing and enriching and enriching and enriching and the evidence is he would have continued to do so had he not died. One of the great what ifs? I was looking at some of the things Beethoven was apparently doing when he died at 57, including a Requiem in C sharp minor, and he had just started a String Quartet. The next thing was to set one of Goethe's *Faust*. It is interesting how these myths emerge, that composers know their end is coming and in some way or another they express this in their music. This is often held to be the case. I think it is a way of compensating ourselves for what they might have done if they had gone on living.

Schubert is another one like Mozart. Schubert is often said to have known that his end was coming and, in some of his last works, you can sense he did. Schubert's moods would change on a sixpence, there are letters of his in which start off like suicide notes and end up with happy catalogues of the things he plans to do in the next 12 years. In the last month of his life, it is worth remembering Schubert died at 31, he had signed up for a course of counterpoint lessons with a pedagogue, which is not what you do if you think you are about to shuffle off the mortal coil. Schubert seems to have regarded Beethoven's death as a tragedy but great opportunity - now the master is out of the way, I can show the world what I'm going to do! His counterpoint lessons were a way of polishing up on what he thought was a deficient part of his own technique, in order that he could be fully accomplished and get on with the real business. Here is a thought for you with Schubert, a lot of people have said, what might he have written had he continued? The other day I came across a letter written to him when he was about 24 saying, we like your songs, you know, very interesting, have you written anything for orchestra, because we would like to put it on? Schubert writes back and says, well, I'm sorry but there is absolutely nothing I could send out into the world with a clear conscience. I would really rather you performed something by Beethoven than something mediocre by me. This is after he has composed not only symphonies numbers 1 to 6 but the symphony called the *Unfinished* as well. I saw a sketch or a page of one of the versions of the great C major, his last completed symphony, and saw in little letters in the corner "Erste Symphony," Number one. It brings the terrifying thought of if Schubert had lived, what might he have destroyed? So actually, it's very difficult to say whether composers dying at a particular time is a good thing or a bad. In Schubert's case, who knows? With people like Schubert and Mozart, even then, these extraordinary early deaths, we still have phenomenal or staggering amounts of remarkable great music. I sometimes think with some of the things Mozart wrote, I don't think I could copy them in the time he spent actually to fully score some of these orchestral works. It is apparently well attested that he wrote the

overture to *Don Giovanni* in one sitting in an evening, because somebody said, "Wolfgang, what about the overture?" Oh God! And so he sat down and wrote it. That's the version, anyway. So there you are. His was a truly phenomenal mind and it seems to me that the point of trying to strip away the accretions of myth and legend is sometimes that the reality underneath is even more extraordinary than the fairy tale version. But there you are. Time to bring in my two colleagues here, I think.

JANE GINSBORG: As you were talking about Mozart and perfectionism, Stephen, I was scribbling things down and what came into my mind was Ellen Winner's book *The Rage for Mastery*. And I too was thinking about Derek. One of the arguments for savant behaviour, for the powers exhibited by some savants, is that actually they can devote the whole of their lives and all of their energies to something that fascinates them. Actually, your account of Mozart studying the Haydn quartets and then writing his own and transferring his skills into something else, this is all about striving for perfectionism, or striving for perfection. That is a lovely example of what Ellen Winner calls the rage for mastery. Her husband is Howard Gardner who came up with the idea of multiple intelligences and the idea that we have particular strengths and so you could argue that musical prodigies have a musical intelligence. I scribbled down: gifted and talented, and the expertise model, because this fits in with the idea. Ericsson came up with the idea of the ten-year rule, which was popularised by Malcolm Gladwell in *Outliers* as the 10,000 hours rule: the suggestion some deliberate practice in any chosen domain will lead to expertise is not as simple a story as that, it's 10,000 hours...

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Schubert rather scotches that actually.

JANE GINSBORG: That's right. At the time that I came into the field, my PhD supervisor was John Sloboda, who was looking exactly at this question of nature or nurture. Is musical achievement something that happens because you are born that way or something that is developed that comes from your environment? Somebody who worked with Ericsson, Andreas Lehman, has written a book on the history of prodigies and shown just how many of them grew up in the houses of composers or performers, people who, just like Felix Mendelssohn's mother, would say, "What are you doing, Felix, are you doing nothing?" Actually, in the present day, I think about people like Igo Povorelich who married his teacher, or Kasin who was on tour with his teacher for a long time. There is that support. At that time the question was, to what extent did the number of hours of practice correlate with grades achieved? The really striking finding of some of that early research, 1993/94, was that the children who were the highest achievers at the specialist music school where John and his team were doing their research, yes, they had done the most practice, but it was divided between three or more instruments. It wasn't that they had done more practice on their first study instrument that they were likely to go on and make their careers in, and there was a lot to do with their extracurricular musical activities. Actually, we have people in the audience who have done research also in this field, looking at the kinds of dynamics that go on in families with musical children.

Let's see what else I have got on my list. What has come out of the expertise research is not just a kind of dissing of the idea of talent, although the kind of punchline of the Sloboda and Howe research, was that essentially they said anybody with adequate support, with the right support could, let's put it very crudely, make a career as a rank and file string player in a provincial orchestra. Okay, there may be a very, very small proportion of the population with the kinds of skills of a Mozart, a Schubert, a Mendelssohn, a Glazunov, and at the other

end of the scale, there are a very, very small number of people who suffer from genuine amusia, as opposed to self-reported tone deafness. There aren't really learning difficulties in music. Most of us have got enough potential for music to enjoy engaging with music as listeners and performers and composers, and makers of music, and so rather than thinking of the exceptionally talented and everybody else, it's probably better to think in terms of gifts. Francois Gagnier had the idea that everybody has gifts in some measure, some more than others, but the behaviours that comes out of these gifts are what we might call observable talents, and this is something I have to remind my colleagues of, because I think the Royal Northern College of Music mission statement says something about nurturing people, nurturing talented students. I say, well, what do we mean by "talented students?" Do we mean gifted musicians or do we mean musicians who show by their performance that they have worked hard and they have the potential to succeed as musicians? The last thing I will say is that I heard recently a presentation by somebody who terribly sadly has finished her PhD and left the field, a Dutch researcher named Freya Deminki. Her PhD thesis is on musical prodigies and she has a very nice playlist of prodigies on YouTube. If anybody is really interested in following this up, let me know, and I will pass on the information that is in the public domain. It's a lovely, lovely big field with lots of thoughts about what underlies musical prodigiousness.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: I was interested in what you were saying about talent there. You could certainly argue that in terms of signs of innate talent, Beethoven did not show as much as Mozart, but Beethoven achieved some of the greatest music ever composed too. I'm reminded of a marvellous story of a composer friend of mine, who had a wonderful way in one liners, and he had a symphony of his performed at a concert alongside a symphony of Beethoven's and a certain eminent critic, who shall remain nameless, wrote in his review that he felt my friend had tried too hard, as he put it, and that it was wonderful to get back to the effortless genius of Beethoven. Bob sent him a card which said: Dear Ted, - I have given the name away – “if I tried half as hard as Beethoven, I really would be something!” I was talking about Mozart giving a little bit of time and consideration to those Haydn, in inverted commas, quartets. It's a shame that Beethoven's sketchbooks are not available in musical form, so people can hear them because, for me, they are one of the most inspiring documents I have ever seen. You look at the first version of the theme of the slow movement to the *Eroica* symphony and it's not that impressive. It goes through another 36 different forms on paper before it arrives at the one that we recognise, and these are just the ones he wrote down. You can see him gradually working away at this like a sculptor who has seen inside the stone. Somewhere in there is a great piece of work but he has got to get at it bit by bit. Interestingly, Mozart has replaced Beethoven to some extent as the official world's greatest composer in the last 20 or 30 years, I think, maybe slightly more. In a way that is marvellous but in a way it is unfortunate, because there is a kind of attitude that goes with the cult of Mozart, which is very unfortunate. It's like what you were saying, either you have this divine gift or it's not worth trying. Who can be a Mozart? Actually, with Beethoven, you look at his sketchbooks and think, maybe if I did try a little bit harder ... and that's a message that people sometimes need to hear as well, I think.

JANE GINSBORG: There's something I forgot to say and you've just reminded me of it. As I came into the field, all the work was on hours of practice and I became interested in quality of practice, and how you do the bypassing. I have to say, my children grew up with a lot of prodigies. I am not saying mine were but I heard an awful lot of very, very young musicians

performing in kind of unbelievably phenomenal exceptional ways. I spent a lot of time thinking about how they did it and what they were doing, and what lay behind all of that. Now I am interested in the late starters. I'm interested in the cellist who didn't pick up the instrument until the age of 16 and got into music college two years later and has gone on and made a career. I am interested in a student of my husband's who came at 15 as a pianist, having had an electronic keyboard at home from the age of 13, and now has a flourishing career as a harpsichordist because he has small hands. I remember talking to him and saying, how was it being a beginner at 16 or 17? He said, there's just all this repertoire I don't know. I just don't have all the repertoire that young musicians learn because I wasn't interested in playing little nursery rhymes and kind of children's pieces. So I'm very interested in that quality, the quality of practice, the quality of engagement, that makes it possible to achieve hugely without that 10,000 hours.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: It's interesting. Some people say that Rachmaninov was the greatest pianist of the 20th century but he didn't actually embark on a proper solo career until he was in his 40s. He had had training, but at the conservatory he wasn't regarded as one of the ones who was going to be the great pianist of the 20th century. He became it after he realised he had to make a career for himself when he left Russia.

MICHAEL TRIMBLE: We are going to have a more extended discussion but I would like to finish this one by just asking Stephen, in one sentence, to define prodigy, musical prodigy.

NIGEL OSBORNE: And genius as well?

MICHAEL TRIMBLE: No, just prodigy. I have been making notes and you have mentioned Mendelssohn, Glazunov, Schubert, Shostakovich, and I think you said Britten, but just define it for us without a problem.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: I think the idea behind the etymology of the word prodigy, as I remember, is it is something that amazes in some way or another. I have just thought of a quotation from Schopenhauer that might be quite nice here: talent sees a target no one else can see, genius hits it.

MICHAEL TRIMBLE: At that point, I think we will break this particular discussion and then the other members who contributed today can come up to the podium? Stephen, thank you very much.