

## ACCOUNT OF A VERY REMARKABLE YOUNG MUSICIAN.

In a LETTER to MATHEW MATY M.D. Sec. R.S.<sup>a</sup>

Sir,

If I was to send you a well-attested account of a boy who measured seven feet in height, when he was not more than eight years of age, it might be considered as not undeserving the notice of the Royal Society.

The instance which I now desire you will communicate to that learned body, of as early an exertion of most extraordinary musical talents, seems perhaps equally to claim their attention.

Joannes Chrysotomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart was born at Saltzbourg, in Bavaria, on the 17th of January, 1756.<sup>b</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> This is re-printed from the LXth volume of the Philosophical Transactions, for the year 1770.

<sup>b</sup> I here subjoin a copy of the translation from the register at Saltzbourg, as it was procured from his excellency Count Haslang, envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary of the electors of Bavaria and Palatine:

"I, the under-written, certify, that in the year 1756, the 17th of January, at eight o' clock in the evening, was born Joannes Chrisostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus, son of Mr. Leopold Mozart, organist of his highness the prince of Saltzbourg, and of Maria Ann his lawful wife (whose maiden name was Pertlin), and christened the day following, at ten o' clock in the morning, at the prince's cathedral church here; his godfather being Gottlieb Pergmayr, merchant in this city. In truth whereof, I have taken this certificate from the parochial register of christenings, and under the usual seal, signed the same with my own hand.

Saltzbourg, Jan. 3. 1769.

Leopold Comprecht,  
Chaplain to his Highness in this city."

I have been informed, by a most able musician and composer, that he frequently saw the boy at Vienna, when he was little more than four years old.

By this time he not only was capable of executing lessons on his favourite instrument the harpsichord, but composed some in an easy stile and taste, which were much approved of. His extraordinary musical talents soon reached the ears of the present empress dowager, who used to place him upon her knees whilst he played on the harpsichord. This notice taken of him by so great a personage, together with certain consciousness of his most singular abilities, had much emboldened the little musician. Being therefore the next year at one of the German courts, where the elector encouraged him, by saying, that he had nothing to fear from his august presence; little Mozart immediately sat down with great confidence to his harpsichord, informing his highness, that he had played before the empress.

At seven years of age his father carried him to Paris, where he so distinguished himself by his compositions that an engraving was made of him. The father and sister who are introduced in this print are excessively like their portraits, as is also little Mozart, who is stiled: "Compositeur et Maître de Musique, âgé de sept ans."<sup>c</sup> After the name of the engraver follows the date, which is in 1764; Mozart was therefore at this time in the eighth year of his age.

Upon leaving Paris, he came over to England, where he continued more than a year. As during this time I was witness of his most extraordinary abilities as a musician, both at some public concerts, and likewise by having been alone with him for a considerable time at his father's house; I send you the following account, amazing and incredible almost as it may appear.

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<sup>c</sup> An engraving of the boy himself is annexed.

I carried to him a manuscript duet, which was composed by an English gentleman to some favourite words in Metastasio's opera of Demofonte. The whole score was in five parts, viz. accompaniments for a first and second violin, the two vocal parts, and a base. I shall here likewise mention, that the parts for the first and second voice were written in the counter-tenor cleff; the reason for taking notice of which particular will appear hereafter.

My intention in carrying with me this manuscript composition, was to have an irrefragable proof of his abilities as a player at sight, it being absolutely impossible that he could have ever seen the music before.

The score was no sooner put upon his desk, than he began to play the symphony in a most masterly manner, as well as in the time and stile which corresponded with the intention of the composer. I mention this circumstance, because the greatest masters often fail in these particulars on the first trial. The symphony ended, he took the upper part, leaving the under one to his father.

His voice, in the tone of it, was thin and infantine, but nothing could exceed the masterly manner in which he sung.

His father, who took the under part in this duet, was once or twice out, though the passages were not more difficult than those in the upper one; on which occasions the son looked back with some anger, pointing out to him some mistakes, and setting him right.

He not only however did complete justice to the duet, by singing his own part in the truest taste, and with the greatest precision: he also threw in the accompaniments of the two violins, wherever they were most necessary, and produced the best effects. It is well known that none but the most capital musicians are capable of accompanying in this superior stile.

As many of those who may be present when this letter may have the honour of being read before the society, may not possibly be acquainted with the difficulty of playing thus at sight from a musical score, I will endeavour to explain it by the most similar comparison I can think of.

I must, at the same time, admit, that the illustration will fail in one particular, as the voice in reading cannot comprehend more than what is contained in a single line. I must suppose, however, that the reader's eye, by habit and quickness, may take in other lines, though the voice cannot articulate them as the musician accompanies the words of an air by his harpsichord.

Let it be imagined, therefore, that a child of eight years old was directed to read five lines<sup>a</sup> at once, in four<sup>b</sup> of which the letters of the alphabet were to have different powers.

For example, in the first line A, to have its common powers.

In the second that of B.

In the third that of C.

In the fourth of D.

Let it be conceived also, that the lines so composed of characters, with different powers, are not ranged so as to be read at

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<sup>a</sup> By this I mean,  
The two parts for the violins.  
The upper part for the voice.  
The words set to music.  
And lastly, the base.

<sup>b</sup> By this I mean,  
The violin parts in the common treble cleff.  
The upper part for the voice in the counter-tenor cleff, as before mentioned.  
The words in common characters.  
And the base in its common cleff.

all times one exactly under the other, but often in a desultory manner.

Suppose, then, a capital speech in Shakespeare<sup>a</sup> never seen before, and yet read by a child of eight years old, with all the pathetic energy of a Garrick.

Let it be conceived likewise, that the same child is reading, with a glance of the eye, three different comments on this speech, tending to its illustration; and that one comment is written in Greek, the second in Hebrew, and the third in Arabic characters.

Let it be also supposed, that by different signs he could point out which comment is most material upon every word; and sometimes that perhaps all three are so, at others only two of them.

When all this is conceived, it will convey some idea of what this boy was capable of, in singing such a duet at sight in a masterly manner from the score, throwing in at the same time all its proper accompaniments.

When he had finished the duet, he expressed himself highly in its approbation, asking, with some eagerness, whether I had brought any more such music.

Having been informed, however, that he was often visited with musical ideas, to which, even in the midst of the night, he would give utterance on his harpsichord; I told his father, that I should be glad to hear some of his extemporaneous flights.

The father shook his head at this, saying, that it depended entirely upon his being as it were musically inspired, but that I might ask him whether he was in humour for such a composition.

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<sup>a</sup> The words in Metastasio's duet, which little Mozart sung, are very pathetic.

Happening to know that little Mozart was much taken notice of by Manzoli, the famous singer, who came over to England in 1764, I said to the boy, that I should be glad to hear an extemporary *Love Song*, such as his friend Manzoli might choose in an opera.

The boy on this (who continued to sit at his harpsichord) looked back with much archness, and immediately began five or six lines of a jargon recitative proper to introduce a love song.

He then played a symphony which might correspond with an air composed to the single word, *Affetto*.

It had a first and second part, which, together with the symphonies, was of the length that opera songs generally last: if this extemporary composition was not amazingly capital, yet it was really above mediocrity, and shewed most extraordinary readiness of invention.

Finding that he was in humour, and as it were inspired, I then desired him to compose a *Song of Rage*, such as might be proper for the opera stage.

The boy again looked back with much archness, and began five or six lines of a jargon recitative proper to precede a *Song of Anger*. This lasted also about the same time with the *Song of Love*; and in the middle of it he had worked himself up to such a pitch, that he beat his harpsichord like a person possessed, rising sometimes in chair. The word he pitched upon for this second extemporary composition was, *Perfido*.

After this he played a difficult lesson, which he had finished a day or two before;<sup>a</sup> his execution was amazing, considering

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<sup>a</sup> He published six sonatas for the harpsichord, with an accompaniment for the violin, or German flute, which are sold by R. Bremner, in the Strand, and are intituled, *Oeuvre Trois*<sup>me</sup>.

that his little fingers could scarcely reach a sixth on the harpsichord.

His astonishing readiness, however, did not arise merely from great practice; he had a thorough knowledge of the fundamental principles of composition, as, upon producing a treble, he immediately wrote a base under it, which, when tried, had a very good effect.

He was also a great master of modulation, and his transitions from one key to another were excessively natural and judicious; he practised in this manner for a considerable time with a handkerchief over the keys of the harpsichord.

The facts which I have been mentioning I was myself an eyewitness of; to which I must add, that I have been informed by two or three able musicians, when Bach the celebrated composer had begun a fugue and left off abruptly, that little Mozart hath immediately taken it up, and worked it after a most masterly manner.

Witness as I was myself of most of these extraordinary facts, I must own that I could not help suspecting his father imposed with regard to the real age of the boy, though he had not only a most childish appearance, but likewise had all the actions of that stage of life.

For example, whilst he was playing to me, a favourite cat came in, upon which he immediately left his harpsichord, nor could we bring him back for a considerable time.

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He is said in the title page to have been only eight years of age when he composed these sonatas.

The dedication is to the Queen, and is dated at London, January 8, 1765.

He subscribes himself, "très humble, et très obéissant *petit* serviteur."

These lessons are composed in a very original stile, and some of them are masterly.

He would also sometimes run about the room with a stick between his legs by way of horse.

I found likewise that most of the London musicians were of the same opinion with regard to his age, not believing it possible that a child of so tender years could surpass most of the masters in that science.

I have therefore for a considerable time made the best inquiries I was able from some of the German musicians resident in London, but could never receive any further information than that he was born near Saltzbourg, till I was so fortunate as to procure an extract from the register of that place, through his excellence Count Haslang.

It appears from this extract, that Mozart's father did not impose with regard to his age when he was in England, for it was in June, 1765, that I was witness to what I have above related, when the boy was only eight years and five months old.

I have made frequent inquiries with regard to this very extraordinary genius since he left England; and was told last summer, that he was then at Saltzbourg, where he had composed several oratorios, which were much admired.

I am also informed, that the prince bishop of Saltzbourg, not crediting that such masterly compositions were really those of a child, shut him up for a week, during which he was not permitted to see any one, and was left only with music-paper, and the words of an oratorio. During this short time he composed a very capital oratorio, which was most highly approved of upon being performed.

Having stated the above mentioned proofs of Mozart's genius, when of almost an infantine age, it may not be improper perhaps to compare them with what hath been well attested with regard to other instances of the same sort.

Amongst these, John Barratier hath been most particularly distinguished, who is said to have understood Latin when he was but four years old, Hebrew when six, and three other languages at the age of nine.

This same prodigy of philological learning also translated the travels of Rabbi Benjamin when eleven years old, accompanying his version with notes and dissertations. Before his death, which happened under the age of twenty, Barratier seems to have astonished Germany with his amazing extent of learning; and it need not be said, that its increase in such a soil, from year to year, is commonly amazing.

Mozart, however, is now not much more than thirteen years of age, and it is not therefore necessary to carry my comparison further.

The Rev. Mr. Manwaring (in his *Memoirs of Handel*) hath given us a still more apposite instance, and in the same science.

This great musician began to play on the clavichord when he was but seven years of age; and is said to have composed some church-services when he was only nine years old, as also the opera of Almeria when he did not exceed fourteen.

Mr. Manwaring likewise mentions that Handel, when very young, was struck sometimes whilst in bed with musical ideas; and that, like Mozart, he used to try their effect immediately on a spinnet, which was in his bedchamber.

I am the more glad to state this short comparison between these two early prodigies in music, as it may be hoped that little Mozart may possibly attain to the same advanced years as Handel, contrary to the common observation, that such *ingenia praecocia* are generally short-lived.

I think I may say without prejudice to the memory of this great composer, that the scale most clearly preponderates on the side of

Mozart in this comparison, as I have already stated that he was a composer when he did not much exceed the age of four.

His extemporary compositions also, of which I was a witness, prove his genius and invention to have been most astonishing; least however I should insensibly become too strongly his panegyrist, permit me to subscribe myself, SIR,

Your most faithful, humble servant,

DAINES BARRINGTON.

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*Jan. 21, 1780*

On this republication of what appeared in the LXth volume of the Philosophical Transactions, it may be right to add, that Mozart (though a German) hath been honoured by the pope with an order of merit called the Golden Spur, and hath composed operas in several parts of Italy. I have also been favoured by D. Burney with the following account of one of his latest compositions.

"Mozart being at Paris, in 1778, composed for Tenducci a scene in 14 parts, chiefly obligati; viz. two violins, two tenors, one chromatic horn, one oboe, two clarinets, a Piano forte, a Soprano voice part, with two horns, and a base di rinforza.

"It is a very elaborate and masterly composition, discovering a great practice and facility of writing in many parts. The modulation is likewise learned and recherchée; however, though it is a composition which none but a great master of harmony, and possessed of a consummate knowledge of the genius of different instruments, could produce; yet neither the melody of the voice part, nor of any one of the instruments, discovers much invention, though the effects of the whole, if well executed, would, doubtless, be masterly and pleasing."