

“The Next Mozart?” Encounter with a musical child prodigy on YouTube

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Abstract

What can we learn about music history and performing bodies from videos on YouTube, such as the one in which an 8-year-old Uzbeki pianist plays and conducts a Mozart concerto with convincing character and astonishing accuracy? This paper discusses the way in which music history works through in the individual experience of watching and listening to a musical performance. A ‘new materialist’ approach, based on feminist and poststructuralist philosophies, is used to examine the encounter with a powerful body in performance as a *material-discursive assemblage*. The question whether a child prodigy on YouTube meets the ideal image of the ‘next Mozart,’ leads to a reconsideration of artistic individuality, musical giftedness and the significance of composition and improvisation in music history and performance.

Keywords: Music history; exceptional bodies; new materialism; individual experience; performance.

Although the specific focus of this study on the performance of musical child prodigies and the relation between music history and individual experience, an underlying aim that is of interest to a wider audience of performance scholars is to explore a theoretical approach that allows for connecting different discourses and paradigms. Starting from what is now known as a ‘new materialist’¹ perspective in feminist and cultural theory, this paper advances a notion of the body that differs significantly from the dominant Western medical and

¹ New materialism follows a ‘monist’ tradition and foregrounds the agential, active and affective nature of materiality. This perspective has been formulated as an alternative to the prevalent focus on the human being in modern as well as postmodernist approaches in the humanities. (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Tuin and Dolphijn 2010)

metaphysical discourses. Without leaving the common concern with the materiality or 'flesh' of the body, this notion bends and widens the perspective in two important ways: firstly, by regarding social interactions and discursive processes as inextricably connected to the singularity of an individual material body; and secondly, by starting from individual embodied and embedded experience as the first and foremost access point towards the reality of a body. In other words: the privilege of facts, objective observations and theories of representation is replaced by a new assemblage that starts from the encounter *between* the so-called 'I' or embodied subjectivity of the scholar and the performing body or so-called 'object' of observation.²

Shortly put, the body can be understood as an *assemblage of material-discursive forces*³. As an assemblage⁴, a body is not in a determinate way tied to a single human being or to the consciousness and free will of a single mind. Nor is it, conversely, the product of certain purely 'extra-individual' cultural or natural forces. While the body remains a matter of individual experience, the singularity and unity of the human subject who perceives the body is itself only a product of this experience. In other words, individual and contextual aspects of an experience cannot be separated in the singularity of a body.

Following Spinoza, the reality of an individual body can only be understood in its 'doings': its capacity to affect and to be affected in encounters with other bodies.⁵ Deleuze and Guattari define the body in terms of movement and affective capacities, and state: "We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 257). The affects of a body "enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body" (Deleuze

² However, the main concerns of traditional approaches cannot be entirely put aside as irrelevant factors, because they (still) work as powerful forces in the assemblage of a (new materialist) scholar who aims to join in an interdisciplinary debate with various discourses.

³ This notion has been used by feminist theorist Karen Barad who can be said to propose a new materialism. In her framework of 'agential realism,' "phenomena are produced through complex intra-actions of multiple material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production" (Barad 2001: 87).

⁴ Both the configuration in which one researches, and the individual 'elements' thereof are assemblages. Cf. Barad (2001).

⁵ Cf. Spinoza's understanding of imaginations: these explain their nature 'only so far as the body is affected by it' (in Gatens 1996: xiv).

and Guattari 1987: 257). Simply put, concepts, things, and human beings can all be understood as bodies themselves: they are distinct singularities with the capacity to become productive in encounters.

Take for example the event of watching the video of a musical child prodigy on YouTube: the individual experience, in this case, is an encounter in which a viewer/listener is affected by the body of a performing child/musician. A closer investigation of this event could easily lead to an investigation of a wide range of musical, pedagogical, psychological and sociological discourses. The present study, however, will be restricted to a consideration of music history.

The starting point for this study is my experience of watching the video of the eight-year-old Nuron Mukumiy, a young pianist from Uzbekistan who excels both as the soloist and as the conductor in a recorded performance of Mozart's twentieth piano concerto.⁶ The central question with regard to music history, next, is how the notion of the child prodigy and name of Mozart take part as powerful bodies in this encounter. In other words: How are Mukumiy's and my own 'living' bodies moved and affected by the reality of these 'historical' bodies, and how are the latter, in turn, affected by the living ones?⁷

I will take a closer look first, at the way in which I was most directly affected by this encounter and secondly, at the question whether Mukumiy meets the image of 'the next Mozart.' First and most immediately, I was struck by Mukumiy's remarkable movement of conducting: a very typical and somewhat theatrical assemblage of 'adult-like' gestures. This 'unreal' combination of adult- and childlike elements of the visual spectacle recalled, for me as a viewer, the image of a clownish imitation or a puppet theatre. At the same time however, the synchronicity between gestures and sound and the considerable quality of

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EohHfW7ShcE> (accessed 31/3/2011).

⁷ Living and historical bodies are equally real in as far as they are active in the encounter. In this specific example of an individual experience, the resonating name of Mozart connects the encounter to a wider collective body; a cross-historical assemblage that includes musical practices, historical writings, aesthetical, social and cultural developments. Although certainly relevant to a traditional approach of music history, a distinction between the 'legend' surrounding the name of Mozart and the 'real' historical human being is not the main concern of this approach. Instead, a separation of these assemblages would precisely withdraw the attention from the complex interaction between facts and fiction, rational and emotional processes on the level of individual experience.

the musical performance confirmed to me precisely the 'real' side of this event: the undeniably exceptional talent of this musical child prodigy.

From a historical perspective, however, this combination of 'real' and 'unreal' elements appears to be a returning aspect of the sensation created by child prodigies' performances. As Carolyn Abbate has convincingly argued, one of the reasons child prodigies attracted attention in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was that they posed a rational challenge to the Enlightenment ideas of reason and the human subject, specifically the human/machine and adult/child dichotomies. "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." (Abbate 1999: 480) The strong association with marionettes⁸ or musical automata made the child prodigy correspond to a 'nonhuman' image of mechanic reproduction. It could be argued, therefore, that the individuality of the body in the encounter with Mukumiy exceeds my individual experience, because the capacity to challenge the human/machine and adult/child dichotomies in rational thinking returns in historical assemblages.

Secondly, I turned to a more qualitative comparison by asking: on what grounds could this encounter be understood as a less-than-average, a typical, or a highly exceptional child prodigy? Could Mukumiy be justly promoted as 'the next Mozart'? Not only in the associatively constructed images that appear at first sight, but also, after more careful consideration of scholarly perspectives, the absence of composition and improvisation in Mukumiy's performance turns out to mark a limit (e.g. Stevens 1982; Feldman 1994; Lindmayr-Brandl 2006). As two specific types of movement associated with creative talent, composition and improvisation appear to reinforce the image of Mozart as the most unique and exemplary child prodigy. This image is so powerful that it hierarchically subjects the singularity of the encounter with Mukumiy as an incomplete reproduction: no matter how much I was impressed, the 'objective' lack of these elements implies that Mukumiy's talent does not meet the unique case of Mozart.

⁸ In retrospect, Abbate's very point characterizations and illustrative metaphors resonated with and affected the process in which I looking for the right words to capture my own experience; hence the overlap with the image of puppet theatre mentioned earlier.

Another look at music history makes clear that this exceptionally powerful assemblage has been reinforced and produced in encounters that by far exceed the singularity of the 'real' Mozart and his individual capacities. The extensive work of musicologist Celia Applegate (1998) on the development of German music culture shows very eloquently that a wide assemblage of social, economic and aesthetical forces gave rise to new ideas of human creativity and artistic autonomy in the nineteenth century. Not only did Mozart receive a transcendental status in the newly created canons of composers, the universal value of 'serious' music was found in aspects that expressed "the capacities of a free human being" (Applegate 1998: 295). In short, this context shows that a powerful body in music history cannot be truly divided as a living human individual on the one hand and a context of other developments on the other hand.

The ongoing work of music historians up until the present day must be understood likewise as a productive and revitalizing force to the powerful assemblage of Mozart. Abbate, for example, suggests at a certain point that "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" (Abbate 1999: 481).⁹ Moving from the individual capacity towards the historical context in which the body was productive, Abbate not only confirms the reality of Mozart's powerful performance, she also foregrounds composition and improvisation as the crucial forces in this assemblage. From a new materialist perspective this causal connection must be considered more carefully, because power never operates in only one direction. In Abbate's argument, composition and improvisation have a significance that exceeds the individual assemblage of Mozart: they are understood as qualitative criteria of musical giftedness in a wider historical context.¹⁰ We might therefore think of composition and improvisation as individual powerful bodies themselves.

⁹ 'Clavichord' is the name of the keyboard instrument that was common in Mozart's time.

¹⁰ Cf. Lindmayr-Brandl's (2006) qualities of musical giftedness and Gerd-Heinz Stevens's (1982) historical categories of composing and performing child prodigies.

Yet, the same criteria do not at all operate in the same empowering way when the reality and authenticity of other child prodigies are discussed. The French eighteenth-century writer Ange Goudar stated for example that improvising child prodigies must have simply memorized all possible variations they were able to perform (in Abbate 1999: 480). In a remarkably similar way, I myself reasoned that Mukumiy must be gifted with an extraordinary ability to learn, to observe and to imitate movement. In both arguments, the 'mechanical' skills of memorization, training and imitation offer a way out of the rational challenge provoked by a child displaying 'adult' types of movement in performance.

Rather than being the inevitable product of his time, or simply the unique assemblage of individual capacities, the powerful reality of Mozart is produced and still productive in ongoing encounters. This body is empowered particularly when the challenge to the human/machine dichotomy is understood as a confirmation of Mozart's transcendental and superior nature, but also in the relatively modest attempts to "shed some light on why Mozart was different from all other prodigies" (Feldman 1994: 57). While alternative rational explanations are at hand, historians and musicologists most commonly join in a collective movement that produces the reality of an increasingly powerful body. The reality of Mozart's exceptional status is effectively already confirmed as soon as the question 'why Mozart was so influential' is posed. The confirmation rather than dismissal of the challenge to the human/machine dichotomy, as well as the invention of new concepts like "Mechanical Sublime" (Richards 1999), shows that the reality of this body exceeds the reality and limits of existing discursive systems like language and categories in rational thinking. The limits of what can be rationally thought are actively expanded, effectively opening up the realm of what can count as 'real' to include the experience of the powerful body.

Now, could the practice of confirming powerful bodies in music history become similarly productive in the context of musical performance? The reality of my encounter with Mukumiy can be considered as a unique and powerful body that is capable of affecting other bodies. The experience might justify transcending discursive categories, inventing new concepts and transforming reality. At the very least, Mukumiy has already affected me with a unique relation of movements, but he might as well affect an infinite number of ongoing,

empowering encounters in the future. Notwithstanding 'external' forces like political-economic impulses or other involuntary aspects that undeniably take part in this assemblage, we could start by accepting the reality of the young but autonomous living individual.

Mukumiy's unique capacity to be affected (by observation and learning) is indispensable for the individuality of this body, even though it includes the experience of a fully embodied *imitation* of an authentic artistic personality. Both creative and imitative capacities can be understood in a non-hierarchical relationship as modes of affective capacities of individual bodies. Imitation, in this view, is the capacity of an individual body to join in and adapt to an existing movement: a capacity to be affected by other bodies. In this way, imitation no longer has a purely passive, unauthentic or 'inhuman' connotation.

The 'unreal' combination of adult- and child-like elements is productive and produced as an encounter with Enlightenment thought. While this rational tension surely intensifies the experience, it is up to the scholar to decide which powerful body comes first in a rational or historical consideration of this performance. Mozart no longer necessarily remains as the most influential body in a historical perspective, when considering the divide between creativity skills and imitation as itself a productive force in historical encounters.

To conclude, I suggest to accept *first* the reality of the encounter with an exceptionally powerful body in performance and to choose only thereafter which questions are relevant to adjacent scholarly debates. From this point of departure, the question of 'the next Mozart' no longer inevitably leads to disappointment, but has the capacity to initiate, instead, a debate over the privilege of creative capacities in musical performance. Rather than universal or objective characteristics of music talent, as I have argued, composition and improvisation are historically specific qualities related to ideas about the human subject and artistic autonomy. Imitation and memorization, on the other hand, might be revalued as authentic affective capacities of an individual body rather than as a sign of external forces; neither a sign of passively being produced by commercial exploitation, nor of social oppression and excessive training. The ability to imitate and join in an existing movement is an authentic quality that by far exceeds the domain of mechanic reproduction. Scholars' individual

experiences offer entry points to new realities in which the prevalent realities of consciousness, rationality and discursive signifying structures are reconsidered without being dismissed or radically contradicted. In this way, the new materialist approach of the body in this paper turns out to be productive as a framework in the ongoing study of performing bodies and musicology.

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Freya Margaretha de Mink has a BA in musicology and is a performing and teaching pianist. She currently follows a research master program in Musicology and Gender & Ethnicity at Utrecht University, the Netherlands.