

## What is musical genius?

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**ABSTRACT – While musical genius must have neuro-biological basis it is defined and understood within prevailing cultural frameworks. In order to measure it historic and aesthetic traditions and assumptions need to be considered. Child prodigies and savants are discussed as well as traditional associations that suggest that depression and the melancholic personality have particular relevance in musical creativity and originality.**

**KEY WORDS: child prodigies, melancholic personality, musical genius**

*Genius: a person of great intelligence, who shows an exceptional natural capacity of intellect, especially as shown in creative and original work. Geniuses always show strong individuality and imagination, and are not only intelligent, but unique and innovative.* (Wikipedia)

From this definition, it would be tempting to assume that specifically musical genius must be self-evident. After all, surely such exceptional giftedness would be instantly recognisable? Unfortunately, defining a complex, integrated and culturally specific concept such as ‘genius’ proves notoriously tricky in practice. The German musician and poet Christian Friedrich Schubart (1739–91) hints at the scope of the problem:

*Musical genius is rooted in the heart and receives its impressions through the ear.... All musical geniuses are self-taught, for the fire that animates them carries them away irresistibly to seek their own flight orbit.... Nevertheless, no musical genius can reach perfection without cultivation and training. Art must perfect what Nature sketched in the raw.<sup>1</sup>*

To define and identify genius, one simple approach would be to assess and measure exceptionally high functioning. However, while it is relatively straightforward to calibrate a cluster of abilities that lie at, say, the 0:1% high-end of the musical bell curve, a number of difficulties arise from this approach. Alternatively, an attempt can be made to define the more complex and essentially aesthetic qualities that exist as a corollary between artistic ‘genius’ and ‘greatness’. Since cultures are themselves defined by such ‘implicit’ aesthetic distinctions, this is infinitely more challenging – and potentially rewarding. These

implicit (or ‘tacit’) cultural attitudes may well also account for many other apparent anomalies around musical genius, eg that historically there have been virtually no ‘great’ woman classical composers and indeed until relatively recently, with the exception of some operatic divas, relatively few famous female performers of ‘genius’ (Clara Schumann steps out of the pages of musical history as a veritable colossus in this context).

### Musical excellence – the historical view

Current Western definitions of musical genius tend to include certain key capabilities, for example technical mastery, virtuosity, emotional depth, integrity, originality, understanding and transcendence. Some commentators also include exceptional memory and precociousness in this list. Surprisingly few of these qualities, however, feature in earlier historical views of musical excellence.

In Ancient Rome, the genius was the guiding spirit of a person, or clan (*gens*) and in their mythology, every man had a *genius* and every woman a *juno* (Juno was also the queen of the gods). The comparable Arabic term is *djinn* which is more familiar to most of us in the anglicised form, ‘genie’ – a powerfully magical but notoriously fickle eminence. One of the earliest descriptions of this artistic ‘genius’ is Plato’s (c. 427 BC–c. 347 BC) who says, ‘not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine’ and goes on from this to suggest that, since art requires inspiration, the artist must literally be out of his ‘senses’ (or ‘mind’). John Dryden (1631–1700) maintained that ‘great wits are sure to madness near allied’, while as early as 1517 Joachim Vadian criticised musicians who, ‘believe themselves to be lacking in genius, unless their demeanor is frivolous and dubious, and who act as if seized by Platonic madness’.

This supposed association between musical genius and ‘madness’ continues to the present day, underlying many of our tacit assumptions about musical creativity and the artists’ role and status. Although the cultural language phrases this concept of the ‘divine’ spark somewhat differently, the ‘inspired’ musician is still favoured over the master craftsman and because of this bizarre behaviours are accepted, and even encouraged, from our musical ‘geniuses’. When the Roman playwright Seneca (c. 4 BC–AD 65) says ‘there is no great genius without a touch of mad-

ness' he touches a chord with our current thinking and shared cultural values. Like the Ancient Greeks (who established these values) there is a certain ambivalence here. We also define 'science' and 'madness' according to a fundamentally intellectual ethos, in which the 'rational' is held to define 'truth' more than our more disturbing (*djinn*-like?) 'intuitive', irrational/emotional experience. Medicine has helped perpetuate this. A highly esteemed psychiatrist and amateur violist friend told me that, as recently as the 1940s, standard textbooks of psychiatry included 'artist' in their list of abnormalities of mind, the rationale being that 'an artist is an obsessive individual driven by internal imperatives that have no external reality'. Our culture is not alone in paying homage to the irrational power of music. The creative Shamanic musical healing traditions and traditional 'possession' ceremonies of musical Tarantism, still practiced worldwide, also offer cultural homage to the power of such musical 'inspiration'. Within their cultural milieu these frenzied musician dancers are not 'out of their minds' but rather in a spiritually significant 'altered state' without which their lives would be immeasurably impoverished.

Down the ages, writers and philosophers have developed increasingly sophisticated models to reconcile the apparent contradiction between 'mind' and 'spirit'. Here is Glareanus in 1547:

*the melodic inventor and the contrapuntist are more to be ascribed to the energies of genius, and to some natural and inborn talent, than to craftsmanship...it appears certain that neither is possible for a man unless he is born for it, or, as the people say, unless his mother gave it to him.*<sup>2</sup>

This dichotomy is still being played out in the continuing debate over nature versus nurture. Continuing the same theme, more than a 1,000 years ago Boethius (c. AD 480–524) unkindly suggested that performers 'bring no rational powers to bear on music [and] since they are merely mechanical are utterly devoid of the capacity for thought'. He derided composers equally, by adding another twist: 'in composing they are not motivated by philosophical speculation, but by some natural instinct'. Here again we see a philosophy that holds the rational ('ratio') as the supreme human faculty and considers mere sensory experience (what became the 'aesthetic') as the fundamental source of error and illusion. Like most of his 21st century counterparts, Boethius places mind over instinct because, 'It is much greater and nobler to know what one does than to do what one knows'. He goes on to define the true musician as a kind of philosopher of abstract thought and imagination: '...he who masters the musical art not through mechanical exercise but after theoretical investigation through the power of speculation'. Through nearly two millennia of Christian history 'originality' much less 'creativity' was considered blasphemous, since only God was considered capable of it. As Saint Augustine (354–430) laid down, 'the creature cannot create', a concept reinforced and amplified by Saint Thomas Aquinas (7 March 1274) who states that 'God alone creates, no mortal being can create...because, to create means to produce something out of nothing'. Unsurprisingly in such an environment, musical style, excellence and genius could not possibly include any suspicion of novelty.

However, as divine authority increasingly passed to monarchs and their courts an increasing appetite for novelty and finally the development of musical fashion is detected. This was inevitably accompanied by a revision of musical excellence towards our modern one, in which novelty becomes a defining quality of 'genius'. So by the 15th century we find Tinctoris (c. 1435–1511) archly remarking that, 'The French freshly invent new songs every day, whereas the English keep writing in one and the same style – surely a sign of a wretched talent'. Othmar Luscinius initiated a longstanding debate over cultural relativism, writing in 1536, 'Each epoch has its own laws, its own taste...in music, he who does not excel the past becomes the laughing stock of all'. These philosophical changes introduce the notion of musical originality as a necessary trait of excellence and hence, inevitably, an essential ingredient of genius itself.

### Child prodigies, autism and personality

The idea that musical and other forms of artistic inspiration go with particular personality structures is an ancient one. Aristotle (384–322 BC – Problem XXX, 1)<sup>3</sup> is quite specific about what he considered the fundamental artistic pathology, 'Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics?'. Although to the ancient Greeks, as one of the four 'humours' or 'temperaments', Melancholy signified the introverted and reflective introspective personality rather than anything approaching clinical depression, nonetheless the association was established. In the Renaissance, the dubious honour of cementing this notion belongs to Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) who gave shape to the idea of the melancholy man of genius and revealed it to the rest of Europe. During the Elizabethan period such intense moral introspection was generally thought to be morally admirable.

This notion that musical genius and pathological mental disturbance share a kind of unholy alliance is extremely doubtful. I do not know of any established association between organic mental illness and enhanced creativity (although it is worth reading Oliver Sacks's articles about Tourette's syndrome and accelerated cognition<sup>4,5</sup>) and historically, if alcoholism and tertiary syphilis are factored out, composers probably do not even show a particularly raised incidence of depression. Nor do I believe there is any convincing evidence that serious clinical depression can be anything other than debilitating in terms of creative output. Nonetheless, there does seem a possibility that, at least for some individuals, a moderate bipolar tendency may be some kind of creative musical asset.<sup>6</sup>

Child prodigies occupy a prominent place in thinking about musical genius. Gifted children can certainly face social and personal challenges which make ordinary relationships hard to sustain (see various publications about gifted children by Barbara Klein<sup>7</sup>). In his book, *Musical confidence* the psychologist Andy Evans writes, 'Psychologists have suggested a sort of "basic threshold" of about IQ 120 below which output suffers, but above which output varies not with intelligence but with personality'.<sup>8</sup> He goes on to list a number of other key creative psychological traits, including 'sensitivity, imagination, competitiveness,

critical detachment, radicalism, non-conformity, self-sufficiency'. From this list it is not hard to understand why many gifted children feel alienated and distant from their more orthodox peers. However, such challenging characteristics are surely more than compensated by the consolations of musical genius which may include expressive catharsis, elevated social esteem, admiration and upwards social mobility (not to mention the enhanced sexual success that such talents can bring a little later on!). All of this, plus higher than average intelligence and cognitive adaptability surely constitutes quite an attractive compensation package to the budding genius. Perfectionism is often ascribed to the brilliant performer or composer but as Andy Evans points out in his book *Performer stress* over-perfectionism often inhibits performance and 'high flyers' are also therefore psychologically pragmatic enough to accept that transcendent flow and peak performance are globally integrated rather than precisely controlled in every particular. As Rameau pointed out in 1722, 'There is a world of difference between a music without fault and a perfect music'.

Perfectionism may be counterproductive but obsessive, even compulsive, rehearsal and preparation is often evident in the musical genius. For example in 1552 Coclico reports on Josquin de Prez's creative method:

*Neither food nor drink can please him before he has finished his musical work. For when the inner impetus urges in this way one can achieve more in one hour than otherwise in a whole month. Useless are composers who lack these singular raptures.*<sup>9</sup>

Current theories suggest that it takes 10,000 hours in order to achieve technical competence (and perhaps 30,000 or more to reach excellence). According to this theory, because of the pleasure they take in playing and their compulsive practicing, child prodigies achieve technical excellence very young, and then have the opportunity to develop more sophisticated skills while others are still struggling at the novice level. This notion is intelligently expressed in 1556 by Hermann Finck, who describes the advantage of early dedication (and also the modern idea that learning starts with imitation):

*I consider those as composers who, as the learned agree, were carried to that field of study by natural inclination, and who cultivated their natural talent from tender youth on through art, practice, and varied and frequent exercises...in this art it is of greatest significance that he who by nature burns with a love of music use an experienced teacher and devote himself totally to imitating him.*<sup>10</sup>

JW Gardner (1912–2002) observes:

*...there is a 'tyranny of talent' which tends to force the narrowing of anyone with extraordinary high ability in a specific line. Once the talent is developed it is often so highly rewarded that the individual is apt to neglect (or not discover) his other talents; and society abets him in this neglect.*

While musical infant prodigies seem to have occurred throughout history, the most extreme examples of musical ability and obsessive focus are often 'savants' (previously 'Idiot Savants'). Autism can certainly involve obsessional focus and

activity and there are a number of (commonly blind) extraordinary autistic musical savants. While these individuals can certainly perform uncanny feats of technique and memory, together (sometimes) with outstanding innovation or improvisational facility (that is, novelty within existing musical parameters) it is open to debate how often they present genuine originality or emotional depth. Of course, if and when they do, I am content to doff my hat to authentic musical genius.

In my opinion, in different degrees such reservations may apply more widely to many musical child prodigies. Outstanding though they may be as precocious performers, these gifted individuals often seem to suffer 'burn out' at adolescence. Those who manage the difficult transition to adult musical eminence, either by somehow remaining enthusiastic performers or, like Mozart, turning mainly to composition, may go on to immortality. Perhaps because of the intense psychological adjustments involved, however, early prodigy seems to carry high developmental risks. Nor is there any guarantee that childhood precociousness will necessarily lead on to mature genius. Mozart is the obvious exception, but others, notably Mendelssohn and Saint-Saens, were arguably even more dazzling in their early years than in their later output (though worshipped in Victorian England, for most present day music-lovers, the music composed by Mendelssohn past his mid-20s becomes increasingly worthy and less original). Much more common than genuine prodigy is adolescent talent developing later into greatness (Beethoven, JS Bach, Haydn, Schubert, Brahms, Schumann, Wagner, Stravinsky *et al*).

### Is genius making or breaking the rules?

Consider the following exchange:

Professor of Music at the Paris Conservatoire: 'What rules do you observe, then?'

Claude Debussy: 'None – only my own pleasure.'

Professor: 'That's all very well, provided you're a genius!'<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary psychologists suggest that a radical, independent streak is characteristic of creative individuals. An appreciation of the creative possibilities presented by paradox, uncertainty and ambiguity seems a constant for the musical genius. Sometimes this can be overtly expressed, but most often the composer is obliged to explore such tensions by manipulating the rules of musical language only as far as their social environment can tolerate. If, as held by Johannes of Garlandia (1205–55), 'Any art is a collection of many rules because it limits us and constrains us lest we do otherwise than it teaches us', then we might say that the musical genius must know the rules. But they must also know how and when to break them. Rameau articulated this in 1722:

*It is well-nigh impossible to give rules concerning melody, inasmuch as good taste has a greater part in it than anything else; thus we leave it to the happy geniuses to distinguish themselves in this genre on which the whole strength of sentiment depends.*<sup>12</sup>

Apparently preempting Nietzsche's concept of the 'superman', Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) described genius as; 'the talent

(natural gift) that gives the rules to art' and expanding this idea to suggest that:

*genius is a talent to create that which escapes all definite rules: it is not natural skill for what can be learned according to any rule; hence, originality must be its first attribute.... Everyone agrees that genius must be opposed completely to the spirit of imitation.*<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the ultimate musical resolution of rule and radicalism, inspiration and discipline is summarised by Richard Wagner in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1867) in which Hans Sachs as the personification of the integration of craft with inspiration, and of whose work it is said, 'No rule would fit, and yet no error could be found'. Nietzsche himself, however, is both more cynical and more insightful, writing in 1878:

*The artists have a vested interest in our believing in the flash of revelation, the so-called inspiration, as if the idea of the work of art, of poetry, the fundamental idea of a philosophy shone down from heaven as a ray of grace. In reality...all great artists and thinkers were great workers, indefatigable not only in inventing, but also in rejecting, sifting, transforming, ordering.*<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusions

Where does all this lead us? Although always exceptional, musical genius is measured according to cultural norms which are as changeable as the artistic fashions which mould them. Take the case of Spohr and Beethoven. Throughout much of the 19th century, violinist composer Louis Spohr's many operas and concertos were considered a more significant musical contribution than Beethoven's. Since society is so fickle in its judgments, perhaps the people best qualified to judge true genius reliably are geniuses themselves. Mozart's remarkable set of mature quartets dedicated to his friend and mentor Haydn (and now known as his Haydn Set) were received with public delight by the older man, Haydn famously telling Leopold Mozart that his son was 'the greatest composer known to [him], either living or by reputation'. Years later, when Beethoven finally sent the same old master Haydn (the inventor of the form) his six quartets Opus 18, Haydn was halfway through composing his own 68th quartet opus 103. The score shows that Haydn stopped abruptly after the 2nd movement, writing 'Here is all my Art – Old and Weak am I'. Similar stories abound in the history of music: the moving mutual respect and real affection between Schumann and Brahms and Brahms' later patronage of the young Dvorak; Liszt's generosity towards the then unknown, starving Smetana, and so on. Sometimes the acknowledgment is more grudging, but rarely do we see composers (or performers) apparently purblind to the distinctive genius of their peers. There is no question, however, that the challenge of changing fashions can render judgment askew, like Saint-Saens' scathing review of Debussy's music, which he likened to 'listening to a dog baying at the moon'. Different aesthetic values can also result in lack of generosity, like Beethoven's dismissal of Rossini as 'the Italian Bandmaster'.

Child prodigies come and go. For a single Jascha Heifitz there are probably 100 Louis Petchkai's (my teacher's teacher who, as

a child before the second world war, stunned London audiences with flawless performances of the major violin concertos but in his early 20s disappeared from public view, to devote the rest of his life to teaching). In any case, as we have seen, childhood prodigy is no sinecure to lasting greatness.

We currently value originality, novelty and charisma highly, and our musical geniuses are those who best present these qualities. I am drawn to the slightly unsatisfactory conclusion that since there is no established historic constant in measuring musical genius, a simple list of accomplishments that reflect current values is as good a method as we can realistically make. Perhaps until we discover the underlying personal and social meanings and functions of music (as a method of organizing emotional/non-verbal communication, distilling gestural empathy, structuring and alignment of temporal narrative memory, etc), all such speculation is essentially subjective, and philosophical. For the time being, perhaps we should revert to the Latin roots and accept that, in totality, music is essentially a specific genius of our genus (*Homo sapiens*), which is why we continue to find pleasure and fascination in those who show exceptional abilities, and whom we call 'musical geniuses'. Perhaps they capture in some way the very essence of our humanity or indeed are somehow more human, offering us a vision of our higher evolution. In any case, to be recognised at all, musical geniuses must have either such a powerful internal drive to create that they shape their culture's definition of 'greatness', or such social astuteness that they can subtly adapt their abilities to fit pre-conceived requirements of 'genius'. Both of these require an extraordinary combination of self-confidence, intelligence and imagination, together with 'charisma', charm and 'emotional intelligence'. Perhaps all these things lie at the true root of that beautiful and mysterious phenomenon we call 'musical genius'.

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