

# Child Prodigy Astounds Music World With Full-Length Opera Composition

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Alma Deutscher, a child musical prodigy, was able to name notes on the piano at age 2 and began playing piano and violin at the age of 3. Within a year of tutoring, she was playing Handel sonatas on the violin
- › By the age of 4, Alma had begun composing her own melodies, and by 6 she'd written her first piano sonata. This was followed by a violin and orchestra concerto at age 9
- › In December last year, her full-length opera, "Cinderella," premiered at the Casino Baumgarten Theatre in Vienna, performed by the Viennese opera group, Oh!pera
- › Alma is frequently compared to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) but, while flattered, Alma insists she would rather be the first Alma than the second Mozart
- › Music is a form of emotional communication, an emotional protolanguage of sorts, and like emotions it can have a tremendous influence on psychological and even physical health

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I am so pleased to post this video and I hope it gives you as much joy as it did me when I first viewed it on 60 Minutes. It is beyond extraordinary to have a glimpse into someone as exceptionally talented as 12-year-old Alma. My only regret is that there is no way to post this without exposing you to a minutelong drug commercial, which I'm sure you

realize I don't endorse. For some of you, it may be the only time you see these commercials so let them entertain you.

Most of us are gifted with some degree of natural talent – something we do better, or with greater ease, than the average person. And then, there's the true prodigies; people with seemingly unnatural talent. Their gift is so profound, and comes from God-only-knows-where. Alma Deutscher, from Basingstoke, England, is a perfect example of the latter.<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of musical prodigies out there, but Alma has most of them beat. She was able to name notes on the piano at age 2 and began playing piano and violin at the tender age of 3. Within a year of tutoring, she was playing Handel sonatas on the violin.

She's now considered a virtuoso of both instruments. By the age of 4, she'd already begun composing her own melodies, and by 6 she'd written her first piano sonata. This was followed by a violin and orchestra concerto at 9.

In December last year, her full-length opera, "Cinderella," premiered at the Casino Baumgarten Theatre in Vienna,<sup>2</sup> the city of music, performed by the Viennese opera group, Oh!pera – an unattainable dream even for many adult composers who've spent a lifetime perfecting their craft. Alma, who wrote the score for every single instrument, and the lyrics, was 11 years old. The 2.5-hour long opera, with a musical score running 237 pages, received standing ovations.

## **Cinderella Reinvented by 11-Year-Old Prodigy**

Many were also wowed by her creative reinvention of the classical tale of Cinderella. Rather than being matched with her true love by the way of a lost glass slipper of a particularly minute size – an idea Alma found to be "quite silly" – Cinderella is a talented composer and the pining prince is a poet. The tale is set in an opera production company run by the evil stepmother. The two stepsisters are divas with little talent and much vile.

Cinderella, with a natural talent for composing, is not allowed to perform. Meanwhile, the prince writes a love poem that ends up in Cinderella's hands. Not knowing the identity of the poet, she falls in love with the words and sets them to music. After having her composition stolen by her evil stepsisters, who do their best to sing it at the ball, Cinderella finally gets her chance to perform for the prince.

The prince is enthralled by the enchanting melody, and sets out to discover who wrote the music to his poem. As in the classical story, he travels the land searching for his soulmate, but instead of looking for the foot that fits into the slipper, he sings a portion of the melody, knowing only the true composer can properly finish the song.

So, the prince falls in love with Cinderella not because of her physical beauty or tiny feet, but because of her talent, and because "he understands her," to use Alma's explanation. In other words, he recognizes his soulmate as a talented equal.

"I didn't want Cinderella just to be pretty. I wanted her to have her own mind and her own spirit. And to be a little bit like me. So, I decided that she would be a composer," Alma explains.<sup>3</sup> "Cinderella" made its American sold-out debut December 16 at the Opera San Jose.<sup>4</sup>

## Where Does the Music Come From?

Most interviews with Alma include the same question: Where does her music come from? In a "60 Minutes" interview, Scott Pelley received the following answer:<sup>5</sup>

*"I don't really know, but it's really very normal to me to ... walk around and having melodies popping into my head. It's the most normal thing in the world. For me, it's strange to walk around and not to have melodies popping into my head. So, if I was interviewing you, I would say, 'Well, tell me Scott, how does it feel not having melodies popping into your head?'"*

Oftentimes, the music comes when she's most relaxed, either playing outdoors with her younger sister, or skipping rope. Her father, Guy Deutscher, a linguistics professor and amateur musician, taught her to read musical notes, but questions the influence of his

role in her immense ability to create music, including scores for instruments she does not play.

He tells Pelley, "I thought it was me [that taught her to read music]. I hardly had to say [any]thing – and, you know, her piano teacher once said 'it's a bit difficult with Alma; it's difficult to teach her because one always has the sense she'd 'been there' before.'" Alma also says she has "lots of composers" inside her mind, in a special "country" she created in her imagination.

These imaginary friends provide her with the emotional juices her tender youth lacks. Each one has their own emotional style of composing. One of them, Antonin Yellowsink, helped her compose a "dark and dramatic" violin concerto. "[S]ometimes when I'm stuck with something, when I'm composing, I go to them and ask them for advice. And quite often, they come up with very interesting things," she says.

## **Would Rather Be Original Alma Than Second Mozart**

Many compare Alma to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791),<sup>6</sup> one of the few childhood prodigies that can even compare to Alma's talent. However, while flattered, Alma insists she would rather "prefer to be the first Alma than the second Mozart." That said, she has a great affinity for the famed composer and musician, and "would have loved" to have him as a teacher.

The question is whether Alma wouldn't have ended up teaching Mozart a thing or two. In a concerto in Israel, Alma performed one of Mozart's piano concertos with a cadenza – a musical interlude where the orchestra goes silent, allowing the soloist to perform his or her own music. But in this case, Alma didn't just perform Mozart's solo. She created her own.

"It's something that I composed because, you see, it's a very early concerto of Mozart and the cadenza was very simple. It didn't go to any different keys," she tells Pelley. "And I composed quite a long one going to lots and lots of different keys doing lots of things

in Mozart's motifs," Alma says. "So, you improved the cadenza of Mozart?" Pelley asks, to which she replies, "Well, yes."

Robert Gjerdingen, a professor of music at Northwestern in Chicago who has acted as a "consultant to Alma's education," had the following to say about his star protégé:

*"It's kind of a comet that goes by and everybody looks up and just goes, 'Wow.' I sent her some assignments when she was six, seven, where I expected her to crash and burn, because they were very difficult.*

*It came back, it was like listening to a mid-18th century composer. She was a native speaker ... It's her first language – she speaks the Mozart-style. She speaks the style of Mendelssohn ... She's batting in the big leagues. And if you win the pennant, there's immortality."*

## **The Many Benefits of Music**

As for why she composes, Alma says her inspiration is to "make the world a better place," and she believes beautiful music can do that. She is undoubtedly correct. Music is a form of emotional communication, an emotional protolanguage of sorts, and like emotions it can have a tremendous influence on psychological and even physical health. For example, music has been found to:

- Help you exercise harder, while making it feel easier
- Help Alzheimer's patients reconnect with people around them, remember past life events and reduce agitation associated with dementia
- Allow patients with Parkinson's disease move more freely.<sup>7</sup> The music appears to provide an external rhythm that bypasses the malfunctioning signals in the brain
- Improve your mood; calm nerves; reduce stress and/or invigorate and energize
- Facilitate connection and unification between people. Despite individual differences in musical preferences, classical music has been shown to elicit a very consistent pattern of brain activity in virtually all listeners. Areas activated include those

involved in movement, planning, memory and attention. This brain activation creates a sort of unifying force that synchronizes and unifies people together<sup>8</sup>

## **What Happens in Your Brain When You Hear Music?**

When you listen to music, much more is happening in your body than simple auditory processing. Research shows that music triggers activity in the nucleus accumbens, a part of your brain that releases the feel-good chemical dopamine and is involved in forming expectations. At the same time, the amygdala, which is involved in processing emotion, and the prefrontal cortex, which makes possible abstract decision-making, are also activated.<sup>9</sup>

Based on the brain activity in certain regions, especially the nucleus accumbens, captured by an fMRI imager while participants listened to music, the researchers could predict how much money the listeners were willing to spend on previously unheard music. As you might suspect, songs that triggered activity in the emotional and intellectual areas of the brain demanded a higher price.

Interestingly, the study's lead author noted that your brain learns how to predict how different pieces of music will unfold using pattern recognition and prediction, skills that may have been key to our evolutionary progress. As reported by Time:<sup>10</sup>

*"These predictions are culture-dependent and based on experience: someone raised on rock or Western classical music won't be able to predict the course of an Indian raga, for example, and vice versa. But if a piece develops in a way that's both slightly novel and still in line with our brain's prediction, we tend to like it a lot. And that, says [lead researcher] Salimpoor, 'is because we've made a kind of intellectual conquest.'*

*Music may, in other words, tap into a brain mechanism that was key to our evolutionary progress. The ability to recognize patterns and generalize from experience, to predict what's likely to happen in the future – in short, the ability to imagine – is something humans do far better than any other animals. It's*

*what allowed us (aided by the far less glamorous opposable thumb) to take over the world."*

Alma's future passion project is to write a book, turn it into a film and write the musical score. I hope you'll take the time to view the featured 25-minute documentary about Alma Deutscher, and revel in her musical talent. You will not regret it. Then, if you're eager for more, you can listen to some of the "Cinderella" performances in the 1.5-hour-long recording above. May she inspire you to help make the world a better place, every day.

## Sources and References

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- <sup>1, 3</sup> [Wikipedia, Alma Deutscher](#)
- <sup>2</sup> [BBC December 30, 2016](#)
- <sup>4</sup> [OperaSJ.org](#)
- <sup>5</sup> [CBS News November 5, 2017](#)
- <sup>6</sup> [Biography, Mozart](#)
- <sup>7</sup> [Nursing Older People October 28, 2016; 28\(9\):12](#)
- <sup>8</sup> [Medical News Today April 14, 2013](#)
- <sup>9</sup> [Science April 12, 2013; 340\(6129\):216-9](#)
- <sup>10</sup> [Time April 15, 2013](#)