

The Boy “Wunders”

Mozart & Mendelssohn

*Monday 28th
October, 7:30pm*

*Holywell Music
Room, OX1 3SB*

FACULTY OF
MUSIC

VR
VOCATIO RESPONSO

PROGRAMME

FIRST HALF

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(Salzburg, 1756 – Vienna, 1791)

Symphony in Eb Major, K.16

1. Molto allegro
2. Andante
3. Presto

Symphony in F Major, K.112

1. Allegro
2. Andante
3. Menuetto — Trio
4. Molto allegro

SECOND HALF

Felix Mendelssohn (Hamburg, 1809 – Leipzig, 1847)

Sinfonia in E Minor, MWV N3

1. Allegro di molto
2. Andante
3. Allegro

Sinfonia in D Minor, MWV N7

1. Allegro
2. Andante amorevole
3. Menuetto — Trio
4. Allegro molto

VOCATIO:RESPONSIO

Looking to make a difference in the way classical music is consumed, Vocatio:Responsio is a project-based ensemble working in the University of Oxford currently directed by **Samuel Oliver-Sherry**, a second-year undergraduate music student from Merseyside studying at St Anne's College. The ensemble will usually give two concerts per Oxford University term, operating on intensive rehearsal weekends with musicians specially invited by the director to suit the needs of each programme. Tonight marks the debut performance of Vocatio:Responsio.

As a performing ensemble, Vocatio:Responsio's main emphasis is on devising unique and compelling programmes that invite audiences to engage with wider musicological discourse within the familiar context of a performance setting. With its Latin name literally translating to 'Call:Response', the aim is to break the staunch barrier between performer and audience, creating an informal space for anyone to join in with musical discussion and immerse themselves as part of the concert experience.



THE ORCHESTRA

First Violins

Samuel Oliver-Sherry (*director*)

Music @ St Anne's College

Leader, L'pool Philharmonic Youth Orchestra (2022-23)

Founding Member, Early Music as Education

Concertmaster, Oxford University Philharmonia

Kira Lee

Music @ St Catherine's College

Freedman Violin Scholar, St Catherine's College

Choral Exhibitioner, Choir of Merton College's Chapel

Part of the Oxford/Royal Academy of Music scheme for violin

Josh Blythin-Evans

Mathematical Modelling & Scientific Computing @
Corpus Christi College

Vice-Chancellor's Music Scholar, University of Durham

President, Durham University Classical Ensemble (2023-24)

Second Violins

Wing Hei Woo

Music @ St Anne's College

Treasurer/ Co-Founder, St Anne's & St Hugh's Orchestra

Winner, OMCF Composing Competition (2021)

Former Violinist, Hong Kong Youth Symphony Orchestra

Georgia Barraclough

Music @ St Hugh's College

*Former Violinist, Surrey Youth Orchestra (2017-22), with
highlights including a tour to Germany*

Choral Scholar, Choir of St Hugh College's Chapel

Tabby Hopper

Music @ Merton College

Soloist, Wandsworth Philharmonic Orchestra (Bruch concerto)

First Violinist, Oxford University Philharmonia

Social Secretary, Oxford University Music Society

Violas

Elizabeth Dalosso

German & Linguistics @ Queen's College

Viola, Oxford University Orchestra (inc. 2024 Italy Tour)

Choral Scholar, Choir of the Queen's College Chapel

Performed at the Royal Albert Hall w/ OCYO (2019)

Nick Raptakis

Pharmacology @ Hertford College

Co-Founder/ Coordinator, Warwick Festival Orchestra

Violinist & Violist, Odyssey Festival Orchestra

Award-winning composer, The Death of Ivan Ilyich (2024)

Cellos

Aaron Rambow-Czarny

Mathematics @ St Edmund Hall

String Fixer, Oxford University Orchestra (inc. 2024 Italy)

Frequently in demand with the Music Society, including

RETUNE, OUSinfonietta and Oxford Britten Ensemble

Miriam Alsop

English Language & Literature @ Queen's College

Choral Scholar, Choir of the Queen's College Chapel

Performed in plethora of musical theatre/ opera productions

Toured with orchestras across seven countries worldwide

Double Bass

Laurence Flower

Music @ Pembroke College

Principal Double Bassist, National Youth Orchestra

Pit Member for Oxford Playhouse's Les Liaisons Dangereuses

Former Double Bassist, London Schools Symphony Orchestra

Oboes (Mozart only)

Evie Brenkley

Music @ Hertford College

Coordinator of Alternative Canon Project & RETUNE

Oboe, Oxford University Orchestra (inc. 2024 Italy Tour)

President, Oxford University Music Society (2023-24)

Louis Benneyworth

Music @ St Catherine's College

Conductor, Oxford University Chorus, OU String Ensemble

President, Oxford University Music Society (2024-25)

Former Oboist, Devon Philharmonic Orchestra

Horns (Mozart only)

Alexander Hammond

Chemistry @ St John's College

Horn, Oxford University Philharmonia

Orchestral highlights include famous horn solos in Stravinsky's

'The Rite of Spring' and Rachmaninoff's 2nd Piano Concerto

Ben Colleran

Chemistry @ St Edmund Hall

Librarian, Oxford University Philharmonia (highlights include

2nd Horn for Mahler's Symphony No.2, "Resurrection")

Guest player, Oxford University Orchestra



*For £3.00 tickets to our
 concerts, scan the above
 QR code or visit us at:
[www.ticketsource.co.uk/
 vocatio-responsio](http://www.ticketsource.co.uk/vocatio-responsio)*

*We are very grateful to the University of Oxford's
 Faculty of Music, who have kindly sponsored this
 concert through its scheme of allowing music students
 to book the Holywell Music Room at discounted
 rates during term time.*

*Read more about the faculty and what it offers for
 students in Oxford @ www.music.ox.ac.uk*

FACULTY OF
 MUSIC



@VOCATIO_RESPONSO

INSTAGRAM



FACEBOOK

The poster for this concert was kindly designed by one of our own violinists, **Wing Hei Woo**. For any high-quality design services such as this fabulous poster, you may contact him on the below email address:

winghei.woo@st-annes.ox.ac.uk

Part 1: Mozart

So, what were you doing when you were eight years old?

Perhaps no one would have a more remarkable answer to this than Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, though maybe not for the reasons that might initially meet the eye. While today we might classify Mozart's prodigious musical ability as something out of the ordinary, in fact this is quite the opposite in the eighteenth-century, with Mozart part of a group of "hundreds of child prodigies at the time".

He acquainted himself with two during his childhood: a brief encounter in 1766 with twelve-year-old Joseph Bachmann over an "honourable" organ-playing competition is one, but a more warm relationship was formed with English-born violinist Thomas Linley, who he met in Florence in 1770 – they played violin duets all evening while "constantly embracing each other", and reportedly shed tears and shared gifts when Mozart had to leave for Rome. Perhaps the most remarkable, however, is William Crotch of Norwich, the three-year-old organist performing regularly in London and Cambridge before royalty, and the subject of an enquiry by the prestigious Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, aged five.

All of this makes Mozart's achievements look quite average, so why is it him we remember? Possibly because, unlike most prodigies, Mozart's reputation extended to the courts and the public abroad as well as home. His family's grand tour started when Wolfgang was just

seven in 1763, visiting Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and England, where he and sister Nannerl performed in both public and private environments, known at the highest quality throughout the musical establishments and royal courts of Northern Europe. As we all know, Mozart's progress was extraordinary, beyond all expectation, and his musical ability in the end totally overshadowed Nannerl, something his father recognised.

It's important to recognise Leopold's part and motivation for wanting to push for such a grand tour. Undoubtedly, Leopold saw it as his duty to show off his children to the world, otherwise he would feel, in his own translated words, like "the most ungrateful creature". And who could blame him: remember that Wolfgang and Nannerl were the only two of seven children that Leopold and Anna Maria's conceived that survived infancy, and the idea of 'showing them off while he still could' must have lingered in his mind. Indeed, Leopold did want to begin the tour as quickly as possible, perhaps for this reason, or for business purpose: the younger the children were, the more spectacular their gifts appeared.

Yet, especially in modern thought, the decision made by Leopold to take the young boy on such a rigorous touring schedule has been heavily criticised. Wolfgang Hildesheimer's psychologically motivated biography of Mozart suggests that this venture was much too premature. "Too soon, father dragged son all over Western Europe for years. This continual change of scene would have worn out even a robust child", he says. At times, he likens the tour to a travelling circus,

concluding like many that Mozart's early death at 35 may well have had something to do with the exertions of his childhood, a narrative that is relevant as readings of Leopold's behaviour as exploitive and selfish grow in popularity. Indeed, the schedules were exhausting, with the only real breaks in performance or travelling being when someone in the family caught illness, often serious and usually affecting the children.

However, the idea that travel had negative effects on Mozart is something I don't subscribe to. Literally speaking, there is no evidence to suggest that Wolfgang was physically harmed by these childhood exertions, perhaps even rising equal to such challenges. But from a musical perspective, travelling around an eighteenth-century Europe suits Mozart's learning down to the ground. Remember that Mozart before going on tour was a highly intuitive learner, naturally wanting to join in with Nannerl's piano lessons,¹³ picking out some intervals that sounded good to him, before eventually writing small pieces transcribed by Leopold. Mozart clearly learns through experience and discovery, and this is way too apparent in his tours abroad.

Take the first symphony, for example, the one we've just played. It is significant that Mozart's first attempt at orchestral writing came in London, for the symphonic tradition was very active here in the late eighteenth century. Each of London's theatre productions had its overture ("sinfonia"), and Leopold lists in his diary the work of Thomas Arne, George Rush and Carl Friedrich Abel among others that influenced Mozart's work. Johann Christian Bach was perhaps the

greatest of influencers, though, whom Mozart very much befriended whilst in London. The symphony, then, is incredibly stylish and stylistic for the time (matching the culture he is exposed to) and I would encourage listening to sinfonias/overtures from this period with operatic character in mind. The first movement is the loud fanfare, effectively quietening the audience's chatter before the concert (there was no speaker system to do that); the second movement introduces tragedy and melancholy characters, while the finale winks at the upper classes by maintaining a dance-like, courtly feel.

So, how does one spot the evolution from this symphony to the one we're about to play you, written in 1771 during his second stay in Milan? As Neal Zaslaw correctly observes, it is not in quality per se, but in "stylistic evolution of the period" and particularly location. This F Major symphony is confident and pompous, still evidently thriving off of the unexpected success of his opera *Ascanio in Alba* that was the main reason for his visit, and in a complete stylistic shift, the influence of Italian opera is palpable throughout. In particular, listen out for the second movement of this piece, especially for how it models itself on the Italian aria – the first violin acts as the solo singer, while the lower strings are its orchestral accompaniment. One of the most beautiful Italian arias, all it's missing is the words: I have not opted to lyricise the violin melody, but you may as you listen!

Mozart morphs himself from culture to culture: in 1764 his music is British, while just seven years later he is fluent in the Italian conventions. This highlights how Mozart's pedagogical model can be

traced through his exposure and interaction with different flourishing cultures in eighteenth century music. His compositional growth is reactionary to what he is hearing, intuitively picking up things that define culture or tradition of whichever part of Europe he's in. From London to Milan, it's the instinctive awareness of trope and tradition that defines his success, and you can hear this right now.

Part 2: Mendelssohn

We now push our narrative forward 50 years to the leading prodigy of the nineteenth-century, Felix Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn lived a life that was very different from the 'Romantic' composer that we might come accustomed to: devoid of the emotional, mental struggles and conflict that defined Beethoven, Schumann and Wagner's composition, his life can be characterised by "its comparative ease and luxuriousness", and we can see this through the opportunities he was provided as a child.

His father, Abraham, was a successful banker, who co-founded with his brother 'Gebrüder Mendelssohn & Co.' in 1805, a thriving private bank that was only shut down in World War 2 by the Nazis. His mother, Lea Solomon, was accomplished as a musician and artist, as well as a keen linguist studying English, French, Italian. Plus, Mendelssohn's grandfather will need no introduction to the philosophers in the room: Moses Mendelssohn was one of the most influential German-Jewish theologians: as Abraham once modestly put it, he was "formerly the son of [his] father, and now the father of [his] son"!

Felix spent most of his childhood living in Berlin, with the family forced to move there from Hamburg in fear of French reprisal for the bank's role in breaking Napoleon's Continental System blockade, where his mother founded a musical salon very close to their home. Under her direction, these "musical winter evenings" and the family tradition of celebrating birthdays with music developed and evolved into larger musical soirées, which both Felix and his equally prodigious sister Fanny Mendelssohn were both active and passive participants. The figures that came to these soirées were incredibly prestigious, and the beneficial effect on Mendelssohn's development imparted by such regular intellectual exposure and discourse is often cited. "Europe came to their living room", as it were, and Mendelssohn acquainted himself with several of the finest artists, musicians and scientists, perhaps most notably becoming very close with the author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1821, exactly sixty years his senior.

Both Felix and Fanny were expected to contribute to these musical soirees, of course, and they did so both in performances and compositions. But, though Lea and Abraham were somewhat musically inclined when it came to aesthetics, they weren't able to give Mendelssohn the same education as Leopold was to Mozart. Despite this, they were able to use their aesthetic principles to choose the right teachers. Lea, having grown up with the Itzig family's appreciation of Bach, represented a "classical" aesthetic oriented towards development based on the 'tried and tested', and was particularly committed to what we might call 'Baroque' or 'Classical'

ideologies in music today. As such, she chose their teachers with great knowledge and accordance with her own convictions.

This is where Carl Friedrich Zelter comes in, who taught counterpoint and composition to them. Zelter had studied with C.F.C. Fasch, and somewhat adopted his method of instruction through the progression of compositional exercises from chorale to counterpoint to canon. A central aspect of his legacy, handed down through Zelter to Mendelssohn, “was an effort to revivify the splendour of baroque counterpoint and its most demanding forms”, something that made a lasting impression on the young Mendelssohn’s music. His early works reflect this study of early music, representing a conservative taste. His thirteen string symphonies, then, are ostensibly all exercises for Zelter, the first six composed throughout 1821, and the following seven from 1822-23. These will all have been compositions performed by the string orchestra at Mendelssohn’s disposal in the musical soirees, as well as the solo music he wrote for himself on the violin and piano.

Well, the first six were definitely exercises, modelled on the Italianate *sinfonia* of the early eighteenth century, and the third symphony which we’ve just played you exemplifies this. That’s because, as a performance piece, it’s actually really badly written and horribly impractical for orchestral execution. Not only does the relentless, frivolous character maintain itself throughout the piece, something it self-acknowledges with the humorous, ‘is that it’ ending, but the counterpoint in the outer movement never gives room for the

orchestra to ground itself. We often look to the bass voice for support in these moments (think Bach's Air for example, with the upper three voices in counterpoint over a walking bass, if you will), but in this the basses have a mind of their own: it's as if the whole orchestra has lost each other in a maze, only catching each other by sheer miracle, of course before going back in again. In order to ground ourselves, we must beat Mendelssohn at his own game, by using the fugue subject as the grounding force.

The final piece in our programme however, the seventh symphony in D Minor, marks a stylistic departure from the first six in that it doesn't necessarily represent the work of others, but rather an individualised effort: the four movement plan becomes standard, and it could well be classified as "post-classical". Counterpoint is certainly still a focus here, as seen in the finale, but rather than dominating the musical soundscape, it is complemented by more up-to-date aesthetic principles that lend itself far greater to performance. In particular, I would single out the slow movement, for its beautifully unprepared and unpredictable harmonies that change key very suddenly, and especially the Minuet and Trio third movement for it embraces a Haydnesque stupidity and wittiness in character.

So, where's the link then between Mozart and Mendelssohn, and what does it have to do with the 'Wunderkind' of which the title of tonight's programme is based? Firstly, both of them are needlessly bolstered into their own category of 'Wunderkind', the best of the best, but as we saw in the beginning, this is absolutely not the case. Secondly, and

possibly most surprising to you, I subscribe to the view that Mozart and Mendelssohn were not really ‘wunderkind’ at all, but rather the product of hard work, quick learning and excellent provision. I’m a firm believer that the work of one composer is made up of an “ensemble of social agents”, from patrons and audiences to social ideologies and institutions, but for a child prodigy this is very much based on upbringing, family and teachers.

So, I say that Mozart was born in the right time (a flourishing, ever-changing eighteenth-century Europe), Mendelssohn was born in the right place (growing up in a musically thriving Berlin), but more crucially than that, both were born to the right people who wanted nothing but their success, and would do anything to show off their musical skills, whether through Mozart’s touring or Mendelssohn’s tuition. This is not to say that they weren’t prodigious in the sense that their musical ability wasn’t exceptional from their youth, but to still throw them away as God-given ‘wonder kids’ I think is pointless. I advocate for a sociological interpretation that suggests that actually, not only are they quite average prodigies for their time, but their musical excellence should be greater attributed to how their surroundings bolstered and catered for such excellence.

To paraphrase Adeline Mueller, “[They] may have surfed the waves, but [they] were also carried along by the tide”.