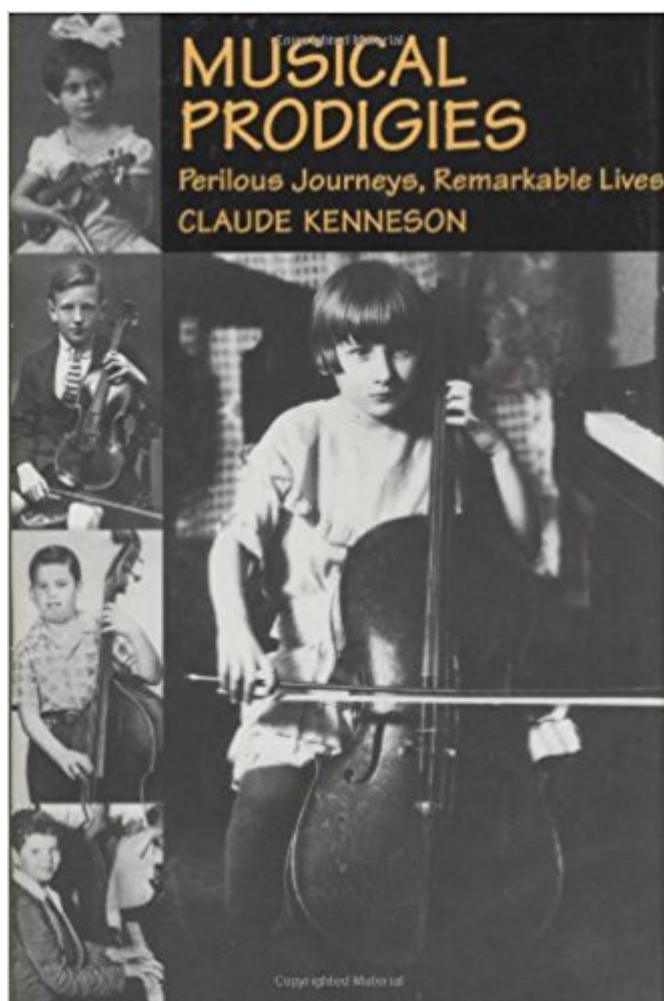


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Musical Prodigies - Perilous Journeys, Remarkable Lives (Hardcover)



Synopsis

What must it be like to start composing music at age two and create an opera at age ten as Samuel Barber did? Or to go deaf at age eight and yet become a world-renowned percussionist as Evelyn Glennie has? This book is a celebration of the remarkable lives of 44 musical prodigies from the 18th century to the present, including the amazing stories of Mozart and Paganini, Andres Segovia and Samuel Barber, Van Cliburn and Ruggiero Ricci and Jacqueline du Pre and Yo-Yo Ma, to name only a few. The author explores early family life, first teachers, the importance of peers and the inevitable struggles for independence and acceptance as an adult musician.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book traces the stories of 44 musical prodigies over three centuries, drawing on historical sources as well as personal accounts and interviews. It offers much fascinating information about the lives and careers of its subjects and their attitude toward the struggles, tribulations, and triumphs of the prodigy experience. Unfortunately, the author's style is often self-conscious, flowery, and effusive, and his judgments are not without bias. However, the copious quotes give the book immediacy and authenticity. What is a prodigy? Originally, the word meant a marvel or a monstrosity. Today, it is what we call a child (the German word Wunderkind or wonder-child says it all) whose extraordinary musical gifts appear very early and can be developed exceedingly quickly. But like the conundrum about the tree falling in the forest--if no one heard it, did it make a sound?--even a prodigiously talented child becomes a "prodigy" only by being put on public display.

Thus, the very concept has become encrusted with confusion. Claude Kenneson, a respected cellist and teacher, never makes this distinction clear, mentioning, for example, the sons of Bach, who, though highly talented children, did not rise to fame until adulthood. Having himself taught "prodigies," he describes their upbringing and training as basically natural and benign, carried out by a "nurturing" team of loving parents and teachers (the former sometimes taking both roles) concerned with providing an environment propitious for fostering superior talent. However, despite the speed with which gifted children learn, this optimal situation will hardly produce a "prodigy" ready to perform at an age calculated to cause a sensation, as is borne out by several of Kenneson's subjects. Ruggiero Ricci's father, determined to make him a prodigy, started him on the violin at age 4. By age 7, he lived with his teacher and had daily lessons; he practiced four hours in the morning and again in the evening, did not go to school but studied with a tutor, saw his parents only on Sunday and no other children at all. Zara Nelsova's older sisters played piano and violin; her father, resolved to have a "sisters trio," started her on the cello when she was not yet 5. "Under my father's constant supervision," she recalls, "we were forced to work six hours per day with a five-minute break after each hour." Violinist Erica Morini also studied first with her father. "When I was three and a half, I played Sarasate's Gypsy Airs, yet he still was not satisfied," she says. Ricci sums it up: "Believe me, when you find a prodigy, you find an ambitious parent in the background." Kenneson acknowledges this element of exploitation, criticizing Leopold Mozart for presenting his children like a circus act, but emphasizes the toll exacted by early success rather than by a childhood spent as a hothouse plant forced to bloom prematurely. Yet surely this is where the seeds of the physical and mental breakdowns of some ex-prodigies in this book were sown. As his subtitle implies, Kenneson feels that the greatest danger lies in the transition from childhood to adulthood, when, in addition to facing the normal emotional problems of adolescence, the prodigy is expected to go from instinctive to conscious mastery of his instrument and from ingenuous expressiveness to mature artistry. Cellist Janos Starker says, "What happens to the bird who sings and doesn't know how it sings? Child prodigies wake up and start asking dangerous questions about how they do things, and have no answers." However, most of the book's subjects negotiated this crucial rite of passage successfully, if not easily, and established major careers. Perhaps this determined their selection, if only because they are the ones we know about. The most riveting, moving chapter is a first-hand account by countertenor Bejun Mehta of growing up as a famous prodigy boy soprano, losing his voice and, after a long period of travail, finding a new one--and with it a new identity. Told to the author with keen intelligence, unflinching insight, and wrenching honesty, it is illuminating, overwhelming, and unforgettable. --Edith Eisler

They fascinate us. Children whose tiny fingers fly across a keyboard or the strings of a violin, on their faces expressions of adult intensity. They seem blessed or touched by magic. We marvel at them and at the same time pity their unusually brief childhoods. Kenneson, a cellist and teacher of prodigies, examines the lives of 44 musical prodigies, beginning with Mozart, Paganini, Clara Schumann, and Pablo Casals. He continues through the 19th and 20th centuries with Heifetz, Rubinstein, Gould, Barenboim, Glennie, Barber, du Pre, and others. These performers led very different lives, some protected and nurtured, others exploited and dominated. What they had in common was a joyfulness and a need, even a compulsion, to communicate through music. Kenneson satisfies our curiosity by telling us how their stories turned out and what their adult lives became. The book concludes with an insightful and beautifully written essay by Bejun Mehta, a boy soprano who has recently begun a new career as a countertenor. Intriguing and informative for musicians, teachers, and music lovers. Highly recommended. AKate McCaffrey, Onondaga Cty. P.L., Syracuse, NY Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I read this book to help research a book I am currently writing, ELI'S HEART, about a musical prodigy with a congenital heart defect. Some of these musicians had extremely difficult lives, sometimes due to demanding parents and sometimes because of the nature of their gifts. It was interesting to me that several of these young prodigies, especially men, had some kind of emotional upheaval once their fame as a "prodigy" was past. Mr. Klenneson's book is well-written and can be considered as a book to be read straight through, or can be used for reference since each artist is described separately. Susan Moore Jordan

Indispensable document! A marvelous read...!

Interesting stories about well-known musicians. I ordered this because I knew one of the people written up in the book. Well researched.

I'm not sure what to think. I never heard how the book was, so it was possibly/probably never read by the recipient.

Skim the introduction. Page through the many biographical sketches, most of which seem to be mainly gee-whiz material detailing the great accomplishments of each prodigy at early ages, but

providing few insights into what, really, makes them tick. Turn to the back. The essay by Bejun Mehta, discussing his own development, gives us precisely what's missing from so much of the literature on musically-gifted children: a first-person account by a prodigy, that goes beyond the surface and explains, clearly and simply, what it's like to be one. Read it. Show it to your friends.

As a pianist, I bought this book thinking that it would give me a deep insight into prodigies and was a bit dissatisfied. It's well written as an overview/survey but is not very deep. Other than Bejun Mehta's personal essay, this book doesn't delve very deeply into the psyche/emotions/life and long term psychological journeys of prodigies. As a classical pianist, I was dissatisfied with the chapter on Cliburn which was basically a collection of quotes from published sources but very little, if any, personal thoughts and real honest to goodness information about Cliburn as a person and a pianist. The author is a cellist and there's a certain bias towards string players in this book. Overall, this is a good introduction to the world of prodigies but those seeking a deeper/more detailed analysis/insight into prodigies should look elsewhere.

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