

XVIII. *Account of an Infant Musician.* By Charles Burney, *Doctor of Music and F. R. S.*

Read February 18, 1779.

TO DR. WILLIAM HUNTER, F. R. S.

S I R,

St. Martin's-street,  
Feb. 9, 1779,

AS your curiosity seem'd much excited by the extraordinary accounts of the Norwich musical child, and as you express'd some desire to know in what particulars his performance was wonderful, and disposition to music superior to that of other children of the same age: after making all the inquiries my leisure and opportunities would allow, and repeatedly hearing and studying him, I have drawn up the following account, which, if it does not appear too trivial, I should be glad you would do me the honour of presenting to the Royal Society, as a mark of my respect and veneration for that learned Body, who, as their inquiries extend to all parts of Nature, will perhaps not disdain to receive a narrative of the uncommon exertions of the human faculties at a more early period of life than they usually develop.

I have the honour to be, &c.

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THAT reason begins to dawn, and reflexion to operate, in some children much sooner than in others, must be known to every one who has had an opportunity of comparing the faculties of one child with those of another. It has, however, seldom been found, that the senses, by which intelligence is communicated to the mind, advance with even pace towards perfection. The eye and the ear, for instance, which seem to afford reason its principal supplies, mature at different periods, in proportion to exercise and experience; and not only arrive at different degrees of perfection during the stages of infancy, but have different limits at every period of human life. An eye or ear that only serves the common purposes of existence is intitled to no praise; and it is only by extraordinary proofs of quickness and discrimination in the use of these senses, that an early tendency to the art of painting or music is discovered.

Many children, indeed, seem to recognize different forms, persons, sounds, and tones of voice, in very early infancy, who never afterwards endeavour to imitate forms by delineation, or sounds by vocal inflexions.

As drawing or design may be called a refinement of the sense of sight, and practical music of that of hearing; and as a perfection in these arts at every period of life,  
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from the difficulty of its attainment, and the delight it affords to the admirers and judges of both, is treated with respect, a premature disposition to either usually excites the same kind of wonder as a phenomenon or prodigy.

But as persons consummate in these arts, and who are acquainted with the usual difficulties which impede the rapid progress of common students, can only judge of the miraculous parts of a child's knowledge or performance, it will be necessary, before I speak of the talents peculiar to the child who is the subject of the present inquiry, to distinguish, as far as experience and observation shall enable me, between a common and supernatural disposition, during infancy, towards the art of music.

In general a child is not thought capable of profiting from the instructions of a music-master till five or six years old, though many have discovered an ear capable of being pleased with musical tones, and a voice that could imitate them, much sooner. The lullaby of a nurse during the first months of a child's existence has been found to subdue peevishness, and, perhaps, divert attention from pain; and in the second year it has often happened, that a child has not only been more diverted with one tune or series of sounds than another, but has had sufficient power over the organs of voice to imitate the inflexions by which it is formed; and these early proofs of

what is commonly called musical genius would doubtless be more frequently discovered if experiments were made, or the mothers or nurses were musically curious. However, spontaneous efforts at forming a tune, or producing harmony upon an instrument so early, have never come to my knowledge.

The arts being governed by laws built on such productions and effects as the most polished part of mankind have long agreed to call excellent, can make but small approaches towards perfection in a state of nature, however favourable may be the disposition of those who are supposed to be gifted with an uncommon tendency towards their cultivation. Nature never built a palace, painted a picture, or made a tune: these are all works of art. And with respect to architecture and music, there are no models in nature which can encourage imitation: and though there is a wild kind of music among savages, where passion vents itself in lengthened tones different from those of speech, yet these rude effusions can afford no pleasure to a cultivated ear, nor would be honoured in Europe with any better title than the howlings of animals of an inferior order to mankind.

All therefore that is really admirable in early attempts at music is the power of imitation; for elegant melody and good harmony can only be such as far as they correspond

respond with or surpass their models: and as melody consists in the happy arrangement or single sounds, and harmony in the artificial combination and simultaneous use of them, an untaught musician becomes the inventor of both; and those who are at all acquainted with the infancy of such melody and harmony as constitute modern music, can alone form an idea of the rude state of both when an individual discovers them by the slow process of experiment.

Every art when first discovered seems to resemble a rough and shapeless mass of marble just hewn out of a quarry, which requires the united and successive endeavours of many labourers to form and polish. The zeal and activity of a single workman can do but little towards its completion; and in music the undirected efforts of an infant must be still more circumscribed: for, without the aid of reason and perseverance he can only depend on memory and a premature delicacy and acuteness of ear for his guides; and in these particulars the child of whom I am going to speak is truly wonderful.

WILLIAM CROTCH was born at Norwich July 5, 1775. His father, by trade a carpenter, having a passion for music, of which however he had no knowledge, undertook to build an organ, on which, as soon as it would speak, he learned to play two or three common tunes,

such as *God save great GEORGE our king; Let ambition fire thy mind;* and *The Easter Hymn;* with which, and such chords as were pleasing to his ear, he used to try the perfection of his instrument.

I have been favoured with several particulars concerning his son's first attention to music from ROBERT PARTRIDGE, esquire, a gentleman of rank in the Corporation of Norwich, who, at my request, has been so obliging as to ascertain many curious facts, the truth of which, had they rested merely on the authority of the child's father or mother, might have been suspected; and transactions out of the common course of nature cannot be too scrupulously or minutely proved.

My correspondent, of whose intelligence and veracity I have the highest opinion, tells me, that I may rest assured of the authenticity of such circumstances as he relates from the information of the child's father, who is an ingenious mechanic, of good reputation, whom he knows very well, and frequently employs, as these circumstances are confirmed by the testimony of many who were witnesses of the child's early performance; and he adds, that he has himself seen and heard most of the very extraordinary efforts of his genius.

About Christmas 1776, when the child was only a year and a half old, he discovered a great inclination for  
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music, by leaving even his food to attend to it when the organ was playing: and about Midsummer 1777 he would touch the key-note of his particular favourite tunes, in order to persuade his father to play them. Soon after this, as he was unable to name these tunes, he would play the two or three first notes of them when he thought the key-note did not sufficiently explain which he wished to have played.

But, according to his mother, it seems to have been in consequence of his having heard the superior performance of Mrs. LULMAN, a musical lady, who came to try his father's organ, and who not only played on it, but sung to her own accompaniment, that he first attempted to play a tune himself: for, the same evening, after her departure, the child cried, and was so peevish that his mother was wholly unable to appease him. At length, passing through the dining-room, he screamed and struggled violently to go to the organ, in which, when he was indulged, he eagerly beat down the keys with his little fists, as other children usually do after finding themselves able to produce a noise, which pleases them more than the artificial performance of real melody or harmony by others.

The next day, however, being left, while his mother went out, in the dining-room with his brother, a youth

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of about fourteen years old, he would not let him rest till he blew the bellows of the organ, while he sat on his knee and beat down the keys, at first promiscuously; but presently, with one hand, he played enough of *God save great GEORGE our King* to awaken the curiosity of his father, who being in a garret, which was his work-shop, hastened down stairs to inform himself who was playing this tune on the organ. When he found it was the child, he could hardly believe what he heard and saw. At this time he was exactly two years and three weeks old, as appears by a copy I have obtained of the register in the parish of St. George's Colgate, Norwich, signed by the reverend Mr. TAPPS, minister. Nor can the age of this child be supposed to exceed this account by those who have seen him, as he has not only all the appearance, but the manners, of an infant, and can no more be prevailed on to play by persuasion than a bird to sing.

It is easy to account for *God save great GEORGE our King* being the first tune he attempted to play, as it was not only that which his father often performed, but had been most frequently administered to him as a narcotic by his mother, during the first year of his life. It had likewise been more magnificently played than he was accustomed to hear by Mrs. LULMAN, the afternoon before he became a practical musician himself; and, previous



vious to this event, he used to teize his father to play this tune on his organ, and was very clamourous when he did not carry his point.

When his mother returned, the father, with a look which at once implied joy, wonder, and mystery, desired her to go up stairs with him, as he had something curious to shew her. She obeyed, imagining that some acquaintance or friend was arrived, or that some interesting event had happened during her absence; but was as much surprized as the father on hearing the child play the first part of *God save great GEORGE our King*. The next day he made himself master of the treble of the second part; and the day after he attempted the base, which he performed nearly correct in every particular, except the note immediately before the close, which, being an octave below the preceding sound, was out of the reach of his little hand.

In the beginning of November 1777 he played both the treble and base of *Let ambition fire thy mind*, an old tune which is, perhaps, now better known by the words to which it is sung in *Love in a Village*, *Hope, thou nurse of young desire*.

Upon the parents relating this extraordinary circumstance to some of their neighbours, they laughed at it; and, regarding it as the effect of partial fondness for their

their child, advised them by no means to mention it, as such a marvellous account would only expose them to ridicule. However, a few days after, Mr. CROTCH being ill, and unable to go out to work, Mr. PAUL, a master-weaver by whom he was employed, passing accidentally by the door, and hearing the organ, fancied he had been deceived, and that CROTCH had stayed at home in order to divert himself on his favourite instrument; fully prepossessed with this idea, he entered the house, and, suddenly opening the dining-room door, saw the child playing on the organ while his brother was blowing the bellows. Mr. PAUL thought the performance so extraordinary, that he immediately brought two or three of the neighbours to hear it, who propagating the news, a croud of near a hundred people came the next day to hear the young performer, and, on the following days, a still greater number flocked to the house from all quarters of the city; till, at length, the child's parents were forced to limit his exhibition to certain days and hours, in order to lessen his fatigue, and exempt themselves from the inconvenience of constant attendance on the curious multitude.

This account agrees in most particulars with a letter I received from Norwich, and of which the following is an extract.

“ There

“ There is now in this city a musical prodigy, which  
“ engages the conversation and excites the wonder of  
“ every body. A boy, son to a carpenter, of only two  
“ years and three quarters old, from hearing his father  
“ play upon an organ which he is making, has disco-  
“ vered such musical powers as are scarcely credible. He  
“ plays a variety of tunes, and has from memory re-  
“ peated fragments of several voluntaries which he  
“ heard Mr. GARLAND, the organist, play at the cathe-  
“ dral. He has likewise accompanied a person who  
“ played upon the flute, not only with a treble, but has  
“ formed a base of his own, which to common hearers  
“ seemed harmonious. If any person plays false, it  
“ throws him into a passion directly; and though his  
“ little fingers can only reach a sixth, he often attempts  
“ to play chords. He does not seem a remarkable  
“ clever child in any other respect; but his whole  
“ soul is absorbed in music<sup>(a)</sup>. Numbers crowd daily

(a) This opinion seems to have been too hastily formed; for, independent of his musical talent, he appears to me possessed of a general intelligence beyond his age: and he has discovered a genius and inclination for drawing, nearly as strong as for music; for whenever he is not at an instrument, he usually employs himself in sketching, with his left-hand, houses, churches, ships, or animals, in his rude and wild manner, with chalk on the floor, or upon whatever other plain surface he is allowed to scrawl. Painters may, perhaps, form some judgment of his music by his drawings.

“ to hear him, and the musical people are all amazed  
 “ ment<sup>(b)</sup>.”

The child being but two years and eight months old when this letter was written, his performance must have appeared considerably more wonderful than at present: for as he seems to have received scarce any instructions, and to have pursued no regular course of study or practice since that time, it can hardly be imagined that he is much improved. However, experience must have informed him what series or combination of sounds was most offensive to his ear; but such is his impetuosity that he never dwells long on any note or chord, and indeed his performance must originally have been as much under the guidance of the eye as the ear, for when his hand unfortunately falls upon wrong notes, the ear cannot judge till it is too late to correct the mistake. However, habit, and perhaps the delicacy and acuteness of another sense, that of feeling, now direct him to the keys which he presses down, as he hardly ever looks at them.

(b) His father, who has lately been in London, and with whom I have conversed since this account was drawn up, all the particulars of which he has confirmed, told me, that when he first carried the child to the cathedral he used to cry the instant he heard the loud organ, which, being so much more powerful than that to which he had been accustomed at home, he was some time before he could bear without discovering pain, occasioned, perhaps, by the extreme delicacy of his ear, and irritability of his nerves.

The first voluntary he heard with attention was performed at his father's house by Mr. MULLY, a musician; and as soon as he was gone, the child seeming to play on the organ in a wild and different manner from what his mother was accustomed to hear, she asked him what he was doing? And he replied, "I am playing the gentleman's fine thing." But she was unable to judge of the resemblance: however, when Mr. MULLY returned a few days after, and was asked, whether the child had remembered any of the passages in his voluntary, he answered in the affirmative. This happened about the middle of November 1777, when he was only two years and four months old, and for a considerable time after he would play nothing else but these passages.

A musical gentleman of Norwich informed Mr. PARTRIDGE, that, at this time, such was the rapid progress he had made in judging of the agreement of sounds, that he played the Easter-Hymn with full harmony; and in the last two or three bars of *Hallelujah*, where the same sound is sustained, he played chords with both hands, by which the parts were multiplied to six, which he had great difficulty in reaching on account of the shortness of his fingers. The same gentleman observed, that in making a base to tunes which he had recently caught by his ear, whenever the harmony displeased him, he would con-

tinue the treble note till he had formed a better accompaniment.

From this period his memory was very accurate in retaining any tune that pleased him: and being present at a concert where a band of gentlemen-performers played the overture in *Rodelinda*, he was so delighted with the minuet, that the next morning he hummed part of it in bed; and by noon, without any further assistance, played the whole on the organ.

His chief delight at present is in playing voluntaries, which certainly would not be called music if performed by one of riper years, being deficient in harmony and measure; but they manifest such a discernment and selection of notes as is truly wonderful, and which, if spontaneous, would surprize at any age. But though he executes fragments of common tunes in very good time, yet no adherence to any particular measure is discoverable in his voluntaries; nor have I ever observed in any of them that he tried to play in triple time. If he discovers a partiality for any particular measure, it is for dactyls of one long and two short notes, which constitute that species of common time in which many street-tunes are composed, particularly the first part of the *Belleisle March*, which, perhaps, may first have suggested this measure to him, and impressed it in his memory. And

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his ear, though exquisitely formed for discriminating sounds, is as yet only captivated by vulgar and common melody, and is satisfied with very imperfect harmony. I examined his countenance when he first heard the voice of Signor PACCHIEROTTI, the principal singer of the opera, but did not find that he seemed sensible of the superior taste and refinement of that exquisite performer; however, he called out very soon after the air was begun, " He is singing in F."

And this is one of the astonishing properties of his ear, that he can distinguish at a great distance from any instrument, and out of sight of the keys, any note that is struck, whether A, B, C, &c. In this I have repeatedly tried him, and never found him mistaken even in the half notes; a circumstance the more extraordinary, as many practitioners and good performers are unable to distinguish by the ear at the opera or elsewhere in what key any air or piece of music is executed.

But this child was able to find any note that was struck in his hearing, when out of sight of the keys, at two years and a half old, even before he knew the letters of the alphabet: a circumstance so extraordinary, that I was very curious to know when, and in what manner, this faculty first discovered itself; and his father says, that in the middle of January 1778, while he was playing the organ, a particular note hung, or, to speak the language

language of organ-builders, ciphered, by which the tone was continued without the pressure of the finger: and though neither himself nor his elder son could find out what note it was, the child, who was then amusing himself with drawing on the floor, left that employment, and going to the organ immediately laid his hand on the note that ciphered<sup>(c)</sup>. Mr. CROUCH thinking this the effect of chance, the next day purposely caused several notes to cipher, one after the other, all which he instantly discovered: and at last he weakened the springs of two keys at once, which, by preventing the valves of the wind-chest from closing, occasioned a double cipher, both of which he directly found out. Any child, indeed, that is not an idiot, who knows black from white, long from short, and can pronounce the letters of the alphabet by which musical notes are called, may be taught the names of the keys of the harpsichord in five minutes<sup>(d)</sup>; but, in general, five years would not be sufficient, at any age, to impress the mind of a musical student with an infallible reminiscence of the tones produced by these keys, when not allowed to look at them.

(c) This circumstance proves that he exercised his eye in drawing, after his manner, before he was two years and a half old.

(d) By remarking that the short keys, which serve for flats and sharps, are divided into parcels of threes and twos, and that the long key between every two short keys is always called *b*, it is extremely easy from that note to discover the situation and names of the rest, according to the order of the first seven letters of the alphabet.

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Another wonderful part of his pre-maturity was the being able at two years and four months old to transpose into the most extraneous and difficult keys whatever he played; and now, in his extemporaneous flights, he modulates into all keys with equal facility.

The last qualification which I shall point out as extraordinary in this infant musician, is the being able to play an extemporary base to easy melodies when performed by another person upon the same instrument. But these bases must not be imagined correct, according to the rules of counter-point, any more than his voluntaries. He generally gives, indeed, the key-note to passages formed from its common chord and its inversions, and is quick at discovering when the fifth of the key will serve as a base. At other times he makes the third of the key serve as an accompaniment to melodies formed from the harmony of the chord to the key-note; and if simple passages are played slow, in a regular progression ascending or descending, he soon finds out that thirds or tenths, below the treble, will serve his purpose in furnishing an agreeable accompaniment.

However, in this kind of extemporary base, if the same passages are not frequently repeated, the changes of modulation must be few and slow, or correctness cannot be expected even from a professor. The child is always as ready at finding a treble to a base as a base to a treble,

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if played in slow notes, even in chromatic passages; that is, if, after the chord of c natural is struck, c be made sharp, he soon finds out that A makes a good base to it; and on the contrary, if, after the chord of D with a sharp third, F is made natural, and A is changed into B, he instantly gives G for the base. Indeed he continued to accompany me with great readiness in the following chromatic modulation, ascending and descending:



I made more experiments of this kind, but to relate them would render my account too technical to all but composers, or such as have long studied harmony.

When he declares himself tired of playing on an instrument, and his musical faculties seem wholly blunted, he can be provoked to attention, even though engaged in any new amusement, by a wrong note being struck in the melody of any well-known tune; and if he stands by the instrument when such a note is designedly struck, he will instantly put down the right, in whatever key the air is playing.

At present, all his own melodies are imitations of common and easy passages, and he seems insensible to others;  
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however, the only method by which such an infant can as yet be taught any thing better seems by example. If he were to hear only good melody and harmony, he would doubtless try to produce something similar; but, at present, he plays nothing correctly, and his voluntaries are little less wild than the native notes of a lark or a black-bird. Nor does he, as yet, seem a subject for instruction: for till his reason is sufficiently matured to comprehend and retain the precepts of a master, and something like a wish for information appears, by a ready and willing obedience to his injunctions, the trammels of rule would but disgust, and, if forced upon him, destroy the miraculous parts of his self-taught performance.

Mr. BAILLET published in the last century a book, *Sur les Enfants celebres par leurs etudes*; and yet, notwithstanding the title of his work, he speaks not of infants but adolescents, for the youngest wonder he celebrates in literature is at least seven years old; an age at which several students in music under my own eye have been able to perform difficult compositions on the harpsichord, with great neatness and precision. However, this has never been accomplished without instructions and laborious practice, not always voluntary.

Musical prodigies of this kind are not infrequent: there have been several in my own memory on the harpsichord. About thirty years ago I heard PALSCHAU, a

German boy of nine or ten years old, then in London, perform with great accuracy many of the most difficult compositions that have ever been written for keyed instruments, particularly some lessons and double fugues by SEBASTIAN BACH, the father of the present eminent professors of that name, which, at that time, there were very few masters in Europe able to execute, as they contained difficulties of a particular kind; such as rapid divisions for each hand in a series of thirds, and in sixths, ascending and descending, besides those of full harmony and contrivance in nearly as many parts as fingers, such as abound in the lessons and organ fugues of HANDEL.

Miss FREDERICA, now Mrs. WYNNE, a little after this time, was remarkable for executing, at six years old, a great number of lessons by SCARLATTI, PARADIES, and others, with the utmost precision.

But the two sons of the reverend Mr. WESTLEY seem to have discovered, during early infancy, very uncommon faculties for the practice of music. CHARLES, the eldest, at two years and three quarters old, surprized his father by playing a tune on the harpsichord readily, and in just time: soon after he played several, whatever his mother sung, or whatever he heard in the street.

SAMUEL, the youngest, though he was three years old before he aimed at a tune, yet by constantly hearing his brother practise, and being accustomed to good music

and masterly execution, before he was six years old arrived at such knowledge in music, that his extemporary performance on keyed instruments, like MOZART's, was so masterly in point of invention, modulation, and accuracy of execution, as to surpass, in many particulars, the attainments of most professors at any period of their lives.

Indeed MOZART, when little more than four years old, is said to have been “not only capable of executing lessons on his favourite instrument, the harpsichord, but to have composed some in an easy style and taste, which were much approved<sup>(e)</sup>,” and SAMUEL WESTLEY before he could write was a composer, and mentally set the airs of several oratorios, which he retained in memory till he was eight years old, and then wrote them down.

Here the difference of education appears: little CROTCH, left to nature, has not only been without instructions but good models of imitation; while MOZART and SAMUEL WESTLEY, on the contrary, may be said to have been nursed in good music: for as the latter had his brother's excellent performance to stimulate attention, and feed his ear with harmony; the German infant, living in the house of his father, an eminent professor,

(e) See Phil. Transf. vol. LX. for the year 1770; an account of a very remarkable young musician, by the honourable DAINES BARRINGTON, F. R. S. who soon intends to favour the public with an account of the two WESTLEYS.

and an elder sister, a neat player on the harpsichord, and constantly practising compositions of the first class for that instrument, had every advantage of situation and culture joined to the profusion of natural endowments.

Of MOZART'S infant attempts at music I was unable to discover the traces from the conversation of his father; who, though an intelligent man, whose education and knowledge of the world did not seem confined to music, confessed himself unable to describe the progressive improvements of his son during the first stages of infancy. However, at eight years of age I was frequently convinced of his great knowledge in composition by his writings; and that his invention, taste, modulation, and execution in extemporary playing, were such as few professors are possessed of at forty years of age.

Into what the present prodigy may mature is not easy to predict; we more frequently hear of trees in blossom during the winter months than of fruits in consequence of such unseasonable appearances. However, to keep pace with the expectations to which such premature talents give birth is hardly allowed to humanity. It is the wish of some, that the uncommon faculties with which this child is endowed might be suffered to expand by their own efforts, neither restrained by rules, nor guided by examples; that, at length, the world might be furnished with a species of natural music, superior to all the surprizing productions

productions of art to which pedantry, affectation, or a powerful hand, have given birth. But, alas! such a wish must have been formed without reflexion; for music having its classics as well as poetry and other arts, what could he compose or play upon different principles that would not offend the ears of those who have regarded those classics as legislators, and whose souls have been wrapp'd in elysium by their strains? He might as well, if secluded from all intercourse with men, be expected to invent a better language than the present English, the work of millions, during many centuries, as a new music more grateful to the ears of a civilized people than that with which all Europe is now delighted.

An individual may doubtless advance nearer perfection in every art by the assistance of thousands, than by the mere efforts of his own labour and genius.

Another wish has been formed, that the effects of different genera and divisions of the musical scale might be tried upon this little musician; but the success of such an experiment is not difficult to divine. An uncultivated ear would as naturally like the most plain and common music, as a young mind would best comprehend the most simple and evident propositions: and, as yet, the attention of CROTCH cannot be excited by any musical refinements or elaborate contrivance.

It has likewise been imagined by some, that every child might be taught music in the cradle, if the experiment were made; but to these it may with truth be said, that such an experiment is *daily* made on every child, by every mother and nurse, that is able to form a tune, on every part of the globe. In Italy the *ninne nonne*, or lullabies, are fragments of elegant melodies, become common and popular by frequent hearing; and these, though they help to form the national taste, are not found to stimulate the attention of Italian children to melody, or to accelerate the display of musical talents at a more early period than elsewhere.

Premature powers in music have as often surprized by suddenly becoming stationary as by advancing rapidly to the summit of excellence. Sometimes, perhaps, nature is exhausted or enfeebled by these early efforts; but when that is not the case, the energy and vigour of her operations are seldom properly seconded, being either impeded and checked by early self-complacency, or an injudicious course of study; and sometimes, perhaps, genius is kept from expansion by ill-chosen models; exclusive admiration, want of counsel, or access to the most excellent compositions and performers in the class for which nature has fitted those on whom it is bestowed.

