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REVIEW



Inside
GHOSTBUSTING FOR GIRLS
plus
AT HOME WITH GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

'I don't want to be a little Mozart'

Inside the mind of a child prodigy, by *Elizabeth Grice*

COVER STORY

‘Would people take me more seriously if I had a beard?’

Alma Deutscher wrote her first opera at seven, and a violin concerto at nine. *Elizabeth Grice* meets a musical prodigy



Once upon a time, as all fantastical stories must start, there lived a small girl on a wooded hill who had a magic skipping rope. She loved music above everything else. When she was three, she started to play the piano and the violin. By the age of four, she was inventing melodies of her own, at seven she wrote a short opera, at nine a violin concerto. Ideas sometimes came to her in dreams but usually when she was outside with the wind in her hair.

At first, Alma Deutscher would wave a stick for inspiration. Then her aunt gave her a pink skipping rope with long shiny tassels and that unlocked still more melodies. As each skipping rope wore out, her parents replaced it with another, always identical, to help her “dreaming”.

Soon, people began to hear about the girl who seemed to conjure music out of the air and could play with a skill and expressiveness far beyond her years. They called her a prodigy, even a little Mozart. Simon Rattle invited her to his rehearsals in Berlin and was astonished by the maturity of her comments on *Die Fledermaus*. Daniel Barenboim told her: “Everything that can be learnt you already have.” Now Zubin Mehta is to conduct the European premiere of her full-length opera *Cinderella* with the Vienna Philharmonic in December. She wrote it when she was 10.

I am not sure how child prodigies generally behave, but Alma Deutscher, who is now 11, has an unspoilt freshness and musical excitement that overcomes scepticism. She is a child but not a child. For confidence and sparkle, I have never met anyone like her. And that is before she has played a note.

Alexander Steinberger, violinist with the Vienna Philharmonic who introduced her to Rattle, is taken aback by her “enormous musical knowledge” and rich inner world. “Everything she does is music. Fantasy and creative ideas



overflow in her. In comparison to some other children, nothing seems to be just trained and repeated. Alma is completely natural. One can feel and hear her light-heartedness and joy in her own music.”

When we arrive at her home in Dorking, Surrey, Alma is outside in the pouring rain with her plastic skipping rope, dreaming. “Dreaming is my favourite thing to do,” she says. “Inside, there’s never enough space. I love skipping with the wind blowing in my ears. I wave my skipping rope around like this

‘When I am in an improvising mood, melodies burst from my fingertips’

and think of beautiful melodies and stories. Sometimes I hear concerts, people playing beautiful music, so I run in and write it down before I forget it. When I am in an improvising mood, melodies burst from my fingertips.”

Guy and Janie Deutscher, both academics, both musical in a less exalted way, are at a loss to explain their daughter’s rare talent but they are devoting their lives to nurturing it while trying to maintain normal family life – they have a younger daughter, Helen, eight.

“It’s a challenge to find the balance,” admits Guy, a flautist. “How much to protect her, how much to promote her. We may be overprotective but if we have to make a mistake one way or the other, it’s better this way. Alma has a mature intellect but also a wonderfully naive childish enjoyment of things. That contrast is almost unbelievable. In one sense she has a completely normal childhood, playing with her dolls and climbing trees with her friends. Yet she performs around the world and meets Simon Rattle.”

The couple used to play music with Alma “until she was about seven. Then it became too embarrassing for us.” Quietly spoken and reserved, they seem the least pushy of parents.

Alma was discovered in 2007 when Stephen Fry publicised family videos of her playing on her YouTube channel. “Simply mind-blowing,” he tweeted. “Alma Deutscher playing her own compositions. A new Mozart?” Television crews and journalists arrived on their doorstep the next day. With no experience of the media, the Deutschers were overwhelmed. “For a few days we said yes to everything, then we realised: this is madness.”

Until then, only her teachers and family were aware that Alma possessed outstanding, perplexing musical gifts. At 20 months, she could sing *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* with perfect pitch. At just two, she heard a Richard Strauss lullaby and asked: “How can music be so beautiful?” Her parents bought her a tiny piano and then a violin, but to Alma these were not toys.

“Every month, every week, something new was happening,” says her father. “The most striking thing was when she started improvising her own music when she was four. In the beginning, we didn’t quite understand what was going on. We thought she was trying to play something and not getting it right. ‘It’s my tune,’ she said. “Wonderful melodies and harmonies seemed to come out of nowhere, one after the other.”

Alma’s piano and violin teachers are from the Yehudi Menuhin School in Surrey. She also has lessons in improvisation, via Skype, from Tobias Cramm, a musician based in Switzerland. Though her compositions may seem to arrive fully formed, she spends hours developing and polishing her ideas like any other professional. “Everything can always be improved,” she says.

The Deutschers are level-headed, publicity-shy people and it makes them deeply uncomfortable when their daughter is compared to Mozart. Alma thinks it does her no



PORTRAIT BY ANNA HUIX; GETTY IMAGES

'Everything can always be improved': Alma at home and, left, performing aged eight

Cinderella, I think people will take me more seriously."

Steinberger agrees. "I am convinced Alma's *Cinderella* will be performed worldwide," he says. "The voices and instruments are handled with care and show an unbelievable knowledge. It's a modern and unforgettable reinterpretation of the fairy story."

She jumps up to play for me. First the cadenza from her own violin concerto in G and then, at a grand piano, the beginning of the second movement of her piano concerto which Barenboim pronounced "beautiful" when she played it for him in Vienna recently. It is an astonishing display of virtuosity, but more than that, of complex harmonies. The contrast between this small person and the sophisticated sounds she makes is almost inexplicable.

Guy Deutscher, an Israeli-born linguist, has given up university teaching to work from home, writing popular science books. "I'm way behind with my own projects because of what is happening with Alma," he says. "But they can wait, whereas I need to help her now."

The responsibility the Deutschers feel to do the best for both their girls is heavy. Helen is also a talented pianist and violinist but music is not her whole life. She is more tomboyish, loves horses and the outdoors. The sisters are close. "Alma wants to have a golden carriage drawn by horses when she's older," says her father. "Helen wants a sports car." It is peculiar that an 11-year-old still lives in a make-believe world of fairy tales and fairies, but then much about Alma Deutscher is confusing and paradoxical.

'I think I would be unhappy at school. I need to be alone to dream'

The sisters and most of their friends are homeschooled. Alma attended an induction day at a local school when she was four and a half but came back in tears because they hadn't taught her to read and write. "Homeschooling was not an ideological decision," says her father. "She wouldn't have been miserable in school but she would have sat there and dreamed 80 per cent of the time. She plays intensely with her friends for an hour or so and then she needs to be on her own to process everything that's happened in her world.

Most mornings are given over to music. Alma does ballet and gym and reads voraciously – Joan Aiken and Philippa Pearce are favourite authors – and is fascinated by complex words.

At the moment, she is excited at the prospect of sharing the stage with Bryn Terfel at the Henley Festival next month. "Perhaps one day he will want to sing the king in *Cinderella*," she chatters. "It's quite a small part for such a wonderful singer. Maybe I should write a special aria for him."

Bryn Terfel and Friends perform at the Henley Festival where Alma Deutscher will play a movement from her violin concerto on July 8. henley-festival.co.uk

favours. "I don't really want to be a little Mozart because then I would just compose what he has composed already. That would be boring. I want to be Alma, a little Alma." She grins impishly, a wand-like girl in white socks and red sandals, with her hair in bunches and her blue dress covered with butterflies.

"Because I'm just a little girl, some people don't take me seriously. Maybe if I was an old man with a beard and was very fat and looked a bit like Brahms, they would. After

EARLY BLOOMERS: FIVE OTHER MUSICAL PRODIGIES

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 1756-91
The precocious Austrian composed his first pieces aged five, astonished Queen Maria Theresa with his piano-playing at age seven, and had written four piano concertos by the age of 11.

Vincenzo Bellini 1801-35
It is said that Vincenzo Bellini could sing an aria perfectly in tune at the age of 18 months, and was studying piano by the time he was two. That's surely mythical, but the pieces he composed aged six are certainly real.

Camille Saint-Saëns 1835-1921
The French composer played two piano concertos in public aged 10, and wrote his own cadenza for one of them. As if that weren't terrifying enough, Saint-Saëns was also brilliant at mathematics, Latin and Greek.



AGENCE DE PRESSE MEURISSE

Play it again, Nino: Rota in 1923

Nino Rota 1911-79
The composer of scores for *The Godfather* and *La Dolce Vita* was writing little pieces by the age of eight, and composed an oratorio titled *The Childhood of Saint Giovanni Battista* when he was 12.

Benjamin Britten 1913-76
Encouraged by his hugely ambitious mother, Benjamin Britten composed dozens of pieces before he was 10, wrote plays, and by the age of 14 had reached opus 100. By 18 he had composed more than 800 pieces.

Ivan Hewett

