12-year-old prodigy Alma Deutscher on homeschooling and Mozart

The young musician talks about composing in her sleep and why video games ruin the brain

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“You see, I have this skipping rope, and I just wave it around, and I let my imagination go free,” says Alma Deutscher, trying to explain the inexplicable. “Before this I would pick up sticks and wave them around, and some sticks were better than others but this was the best.”

She brings a purple plastic skipping rope out from under the table, and strokes the silver tinsel tassels at either end. It’s the sort of toy favoured by children in playgrounds everywhere but for Deutscher this rope is also a tool — a kind of divining rod — that aids and inspires a quite astonishing flow of creativity. As well as being a talented pianist and violinist, this little girl has already composed two concertos, a symphonic piece and a full-length opera — and she is 12 years old.

We are seated in a corner of Café Rouge in Dorking, just south of London, a week before she flies out to San José to begin rehearsals for the US premiere of *Cinderella*, the opera she started composing at the age of eight.

This sweet comedy-drama, which sounds Mozartian at times and almost Wagnerian at others, is brimming with melodic charm. It first appeared as a chamber work in Israel in 2015 and was substantially rewritten before it launched in its full orchestral form in Vienna last year, under the patronage of the celebrated conductor Zubin Mehta. Now a lavish new production has been funded by the philanthropist David Packard.

Deutscher is clearly mature beyond her years — poised, articulate, well-mannered — but today, dressed in a navy floral-print jersey dress and white lace headband, she cannot disguise a sense of joyful, breathless excitement about the weeks ahead: “It’s my dream come true, really, because it’s going to be with a velvet red curtain in a big theatre with amazing sets,” she says. “And it will have a choir,” she adds with wide-eyed wonder, “and dancers, and there’ll be a big full orchestra.”

Well, there are red velvet curtains in Café Rouge, too — and a general attempt at *fin-de-siècle* glamour — but the effect is a little underwhelming. In the 1990s the metropolitan middle classes flocked to this chain of brasseries (even Bridget Jones was a fan) for such *recherché* delights as moules frites and saucisses de Toulouse. The menu has hardly changed since then and the restaurant has seen better days, but Deutscher and her friends enjoy coming to this particular branch, a mile or two from her family home, for teatime treats (she has a detailed knowledge of the pudding menu) and birthday parties.

She orders with hardly a glance at the card: a decaffeinated coffee, “a latte, quite weak”, fillet steak — medium well — and chips with garlic butter on the side, “and shall I order desserts now?” The waitress reassures us she will return a little later. I likewise opt for fillet steak, with chips and Béarnaise sauce, and (yielding to my inner child) a Coca-Cola.

Prodigies have always been the subject of intense and, at times, lurid fascination. In his 2007 book *Musicophilia*, the neurologist Oliver Sacks writes of freaks and savants: a man who develops a sudden aptitude for the piano after being struck by lightning, another who has a detailed memory of more than 2,000 opera scores, and some striking instances of music-colour synaesthesia. Controversially, he presents extreme musical talent as a form of impairment: a gift that has been bestowed at a cost of normal brain function.

The disconnect between the young girl before me, who takes a childish delight in the novelty of eating out, and her evident intellect, is

bewildering. But Deutscher (who has, with wearying predictability, been dubbed “Little Miss Mozart” by some) appears content and well-grounded, and her manner is one of understated confidence.

Both Deutscher and her sister Helen are homeschooled. ‘I think that I learn at home in one hour what it would take at school five hours to learn’

We return to *Cinderella*, and Deutscher lists a number of supporters, including Mehta, Packard and Jane Glover, “a wonderful conductor” who has been on hand in the lead-up to rehearsals, that have helped her to realise a dream. “So yes, my life has almost turned into a fairytale as well,” she says, between spoonfuls of latte foam.

In her version of the *Cinderella* story, the denouement concerns a missing poem rather than a missing slipper. “[My] Cinderella is not just a pretty girl who cleans the floor and keeps quiet, she’s clever and talented,” she explains. “She’s an amazing composer, she composes beautiful music, and has melodies springing into her head all of the time, and the prince is a poet. So Cinderella finds a poem that the prince has written and is inspired to put it to music.”

The setting is Transylvanian, Deutscher’s imaginary world, “a very beautiful place with lakes and forests and, like in the olden days, an empress”, where Grimm characters mingle with courtly composers of her own make-believe. “I have quite a few imaginary composers: Antonin Yellowsink and Shell and Greensilk and Bluegold and Ashy. Shell was the first one I discovered, when I was much younger, so she composed more simple pieces; Antonin Yellowsink is the most recent.”

These composers, Deutscher says, help her explore complex emotions beyond her own range of experience. “[Antonin Yellowsink] is quite Romantic, often quite sad, dark harmonies, or lyrical, but I don’t compose

much sad music because I'm a happy person, so quite often I often steal it [from him]. He's a completely different character from me."

I nod along — and yet this exchange highlights a looming conundrum: whether children, however gifted, can ever be considered true artists. What do they know about romantic love, for instance? What fresh insights can they offer after just a few years of life lived?

"Schubert, I love Schubert, and of course Mozart, and Tchaikovsky — and for counterpoint and that sort of stuff, Bach," Deutscher says when I ask her to list the composers who have had most influence on her work. It's perhaps notable that she has no interest in contemporary classical composers, and that her musical tastes seem to stall around 1900. The writer and librettist Philip Hensher has observed that the freewheeling musical styles of the 20th and 21st centuries — which champion expression and innovation over craft — are unlikely to produce child stars.

As our steaks arrive, Deutscher describes her earliest musical memory: "I remember when I was three or four — three, I think — and I was listening to a lullaby by Richard Strauss" — I ask which one and she sings the first few bars of "Wiegenlied", a pure, bright soprano over the chuntering of an elderly lunch crowd — "beautiful, I loved it! I especially loved the harmony; I always call it the Strauss harmony now. And after it finished I asked my parents: 'How could music be so beautiful?' I don't know what they answered," she laughs.

We agree we've chosen a perfect lunch for a cold day, and slice into our steaks, stopping to dip well-salted french fries into little cups of ketchup. How's yours, I ask. "De-licious!"

Deutscher's father Guy is an Israeli-born linguist, and her mother Janie (who is lunching just around the corner, out of earshot) is a scholar of medieval English literature, but they are keen musicians, and they encouraged both their daughters at an early age. Deutscher was already playing the piano at the age of two, at three she received a small violin as a

birthday present, and by four she was experimenting with her own melodies. “My parents thought I was just playing something that I’d heard and not quite remembered, because they didn’t recognise it, but I said ‘No, no, no, it’s my own composition.’” Before long she was writing sketches and short pieces.

CAFÉ ROUGE

172 High St, Dorking, Surrey

Decaf latte £2.65

Coca-Cola £2.70

Fillet steak with fries x 2 £45.90

Béarnaise sauce £2

Tarte au citron £5.75

Tarte aux pommes £6.35

Ice cream £1.50

Total £66.85

“When I was quite a lot younger I was on Skype with my grandmother in Israel and suddenly in the middle her Nokia went off,” she sings the famous jingle, “and she had a long conversation and I was quite annoyed, so I thought I would make a joke and [afterwards] I wrote a whole different piece of it, with a different harmony.”

Since then, Deutscher has continued her interest in the piano and violin (she is currently playing a priceless Guarneri del Gesù instrument on loan) and has composed a piano concerto (lyrical, late Romantic in flavour), a violin concerto (redolent of Johann Strauss, with a virtuosic solo part), and a symphonic piece titled “Dance of the Solent Mermaids”. And, not content with Mozart’s cadenza for his Piano Concerto K 246, “because he’d written it when he was very young, so it just stayed in the same key all the time”, she has found time to pen her own.

“To get the melodies for me is actually extremely easy, that’s the nice part that comes to me when I’m not concentrating, when I’m skipping outside, when I’m falling asleep or just waking up, or while I’m improvising at the piano, when I feel that melodies are going to burst out of my fingertips and

I have to hold them in," she says. "And then the hard work is sitting down and developing it, deciding what will come after the melody, how to link passages and how to make everything fit to make it a coherent structure. That's extremely difficult, that's when I often get quite tired, and when I need to go to Antonin Yellowsink and ask for his advice."

I sense another difficult aspect of life as a prodigy, one that the family as a whole have to manage, is the pressure of exposure and expectation. There are plenty of child stars who have gone on to enjoy long and successful careers, including the composer Erich Korngold, the conductor Daniel Barenboim, and the violinist Sarah Chang; there are plenty more who have simply burnt out and bitten the dust. Deutscher is well represented across social media platforms, and is clearly not shy of the press, but she seems sheltered from the day-to-day business of promotion.

Both Deutscher and her younger sister Helen (who is herself an accomplished musician) are homeschooled. "I think that I learn at home in one hour what it would take at school five hours to learn," she says. Private music lessons are taken with teachers from the nearby Yehudi Menuhin School (an academy for musically gifted children) and most other subjects are taught by their parents: she is currently reading *The Odyssey* with her mother, and working to improve her German.

She enjoys wholesome pastimes — playing with her sister in their treehouse, where they have a "dryad school", and meeting up with friends from a local homeschooling network for swimming and ballet — and she is proudly out of step with the iGeneration. "Lots of children spend all the time on video games, I don't like that at all. I don't have a phone or computer or anything, I just read a lot," she says, listing Philippa Pearce, Joan Aiken and Shannon Hale as some of her favourite authors. "I don't really know what they do — *Minecraft* or whatever — some of my friends do that but I think it's a complete waste of time and it ruins your brain as well because you can't imagine anything for yourself."

The waitress returns with the pudding menu. "I have special authority

from my parents, and I'm allowed to have an extra one, so a normal dessert and some ice cream," Deutscher says, and she puts in a precise request for the warm apple tart and a scoop each of raspberry and chocolate ice cream, served separately.

I ask about upcoming projects. "I'm going to compose a musical," she says, "I've got lots and lots of melodies that sound that they should be in a musical, they're just that kind of atmosphere, and I haven't decided on a story, but that's my next step after *Cinderella*." While not a fan of jazz or pop ("too loud for me") Deutscher loves *The Sound of Music*, *My Fair Lady* and *West Side Story*.

Then there's the novel she's started writing: "[It's] called *Malvina*, and I want to publish it and turn it into a film and write the music for it. I'm not going to give too much away, all I'll say is I already have the music for one bit of it, which is where there are these ghosts called the Gerril Ghosts, and they suck the time out of people's lives, and out of the world, and they have a wild hunt on skeleton horses to terrify people in the moonlight at midnight," she says, relishing the ghoulish details.

Our puddings arrive and Deutscher's face falls. There's been some confusion — the ice cream turns out to be a chocolate-raspberry blend; she insists it's not a problem but the waitress returns with a consolatory scoop of strawberry. I ask if she enjoys cooking at home as I tackle a rather solid lemon tart. "I love cooking," she says, "sometimes I dress up as a cook . . . I call myself Marigold and I have a blonde wig, and I put on an apron, and I come in with a funny accent," she laughs. And what dishes do you prepare? "Cheese soufflé . . . It's simpler than it looks."

Who knows whether Deutscher will go on to find popular or critical success. Perhaps she will follow in the footsteps of Korngold, whose ballet *Der Schneemann*, written at the age of 11, dazzled audiences at its Vienna premiere in 1910, and who went on to enjoy both. She remains open-minded. "I want *Cinderella* to be performed in the Met and the Royal Opera House and La Scala, and all the big opera houses in the world, and I want all the most amazing violinists and pianists in the world to play my

violin concerto and my piano concerto," she says, beaming. "I also want people to listen to beautiful music. I want people to think it's not a crime to write beautiful music."

Lunch over, I accompany Deutscher and her mother back to their house, where, under a watchful portrait of Mozart's talented sister Nannerl, she performs the lively cadenza from her own piano concerto. And I marvel at her transformation from *kind* to *wunderkind* — then back again, as I extend my hand in farewell and she launches into a hug.

Laura Battle is deputy editor of House & Home

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