

THE SATURDAY PROFILE

This 14-Year-Old Prodigy Doesn't Want to Be Called 'a New Mozart'

By MELISSA EDDY

VIENNA

ALMA DEUTSCHER has not yet become a household name, but it seems only a matter of time.

An accomplished pianist and violinist, she is also a composer, having written concertos for piano and violin and an opera. In December, she will make her debut at Carnegie Hall, where she will play the solo violin and piano in her two concertos, while the orchestra will play selections from her opera and her most recent work, a Viennese waltz. Next month, she will record a retrospective album with Sony of piano melodies she composed going back to when she was just 4 years old.

Which, as a matter of fact, isn't all that long ago, because Alma Deutscher, who has been called by some "a new Mozart," is 14.

Sitting on a sofa in the living room of her family's home in Vienna, dominated by a baby grand piano, Ms. Deutscher subtly, but clearly, rolls her eyes at the mention of Mozart, a comparison she rejects. She may be one of the most gifted musical talents of her generation, lauded by Zubin Mehta and Simon Rattle, but she is also a teenager testing the bounds of her freedom and pushing back against expectations.

In Ms. Deutscher's case, that means defying her critics and the commentary that rages in online debates over her insistence that "music should be beautiful."

"Lots of people have been telling me that if I want to grow up, I have to compose music that will reflect the ugliness of the modern world," she said. "I don't want to do this. I want to compose music that I find beautiful."

The latest result is a modern interpretation of a Viennese waltz that begins with the sounds of the bustling, honking chaos of a busy city street and gradually spins them out into a romantic waltz that ends with a playful melody based on the wail of a Viennese police siren. The full orchestral premiere last month brought the audience in Sonderborg, Denmark, to its feet.

Johann Wildner, who conducted the performance, praised her creativity and harmonic imagination, cautioning against celebrating her simply because of her age.

"She is not good because she is young," Mr. Wildner said. "She is good because she is extremely talented and has matured very early."

BORN in 2005, Ms. Deutscher spent her first five years in Oxford, England, where her mother was teaching. While her parents were academics, they also loved music and would play together as a family, with her mother, Janie, on the piano and her father, Guy, on the flute. But Ms. Deutscher's ability rapidly surpassed that of her parents.

She received her first violin at age 3, and left her first teacher on the instrument begging to take a break after more than an hour. At 4 she would sit for hours at the piano, working out melodies she said were songs from the imaginary world she called Transylvanian. Recognizing his daughter's extraordinary abilities, Mr. Deutscher tried to find a teacher willing to work with a preschool composer, but most turned him down. "They would say to call back in 10 years — that was those who were being polite," he said.

As Alma's renown spread, the Deutschers gave up their teaching jobs and moved to Dorking, in Surrey, and devoted themselves to managing her schedule. These days, Mr. Deutscher said, there are so many people who want to work with his daughter that he



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ALMA DEUTSCHER

spends a lot of his time fending them off. Having realized that no school would be able to meet Alma's special needs as a budding musician and composer, her mother began home schooling her and her sister Helen, now 11. Mr. Deutscher has managed to keep one foot in the academic world, writing books on his specialty, linguistics.

They are selective with her performance schedule, which last year included concerts in China, Germany and Switzerland, as well as several in Austria, where Ms. Deutscher has been embraced and celebrated for years. After spending months in 2016 in Vienna for rehearsals of her opera, "Cinderella," the family decided last year to move, so

the girls could learn German and Alma could indulge in the wide range of musical opportunities the city offered.

"I lived in England, but I grew up on the music of Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven and Haydn," she said. "Musically speaking, I think that Vienna's always been my home."

Moving to a European capital has also offered both Alma and Helen freedom to move around on their own, riding the subway to the opera house or to the vineyards at the city limits. There, beyond the paths Beethoven roamed, Ms. Deutscher takes long walks, accompanied by her family and the pink, sparkly tasseled jump rope that she has carried with her since she

was a child.

"When I was younger, I really thought it was the rope that gave me inspiration," she said, with a sly smile at her former self. Although she still wears dresses, jumps on the trampoline and climbs trees, the little girl who charmed a TV audience as an 8-year-old on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" has been replaced by a tall young woman.

"Now, I know it's not really the rope," she said. "It's the state of mind that I get into when I wave it around."

When chatting about her friends and books, she bubbles with enthusiasm and wide-eyed curiosity. But when the topic switches to music, she flicks her long blond hair over her shoulders and becomes focused and intense, speaking of musical techniques and tonality with an ease and understanding far beyond her years.

Recently, she has struggled with the plot for an opera that was commissioned by the Salzburg State Theater. Much of the music is in her head, she said, but unlike "Cinderella," which she wrote at 10 — it debuted in Vienna in December 2016 and played to a sold-out house at the Opera San Jose in California the following year — finding a story line this time has required more effort.

"With 'Cinderella,' it was easy, it was my favorite story as a little girl," she said. Although she is a voracious reader, "I don't have a favorite story any more," she said.

In addition to her home schooling, Ms. Deutscher takes classes in ballroom dance and theater. Singing in two different choirs has helped her with her German and provided a circle of friends, whom she meets at cafes for a slice of Sacher torte or an apricot

palatschinke, a Viennese crepe.

"I would love to go and dance in the balls in Vienna," she said. "And maybe dance to my own waltz."

Although she has a website, an active Facebook page and 86,000 subscribers to her YouTube channel, which her father credits with helping build her popularity, Ms. Deutscher says she has little interest in social media.

She does not even own a cellphone. If her friends want to get in touch, or she needs to record a melody when it springs into her head, she relies on her parents' phones. She has just recently begun composing on a computer, rather than paper, but she still carries a notebook to jot down melodies and ideas.

IN the future, she says she would like to compose a symphonic poem, a full symphony and, someday, a musical. More immediately, she is looking forward to her performance at Carnegie Hall, where she will be among the youngest composers to perform their own works there, officials there said.

But while the world focuses on her achievements, Ms. Deutscher said she is grateful for the opportunity and adventure her life has offered her. A portrait of Mozart's sister, Maria Anna, or Nannerl, whose talents were lost in her brother's shadow and was eventually forced to abandon music to marry, hangs in the living room.

"I'm a very strong feminist and I'm really happy that I was born now, when girls are allowed to develop their talents," she said. "Because if I had been born beforehand, I probably wouldn't have been allowed to become a composer. I would have had to be a housekeeper."



Alma Deutscher, right, clutching the rope she said helps her in composing, jumps with her sister Helen, 11, on a trampoline in their garden in Vienna.