



REVIEW: BOOK

Mozart and the Mediation of Childhood

Adeline Mueller

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Childhood is new. While every society certainly organizes itself in some form or another around age, the particular values that contemporary European and North American societies place on childhood and children are relatively recent and idiosyncratic. These include the valorization of childhood innocence (which might as easily be called naivety or even ignorance); the association of children with nature, in the sense both of animals and of essences; the expectation that children are vulnerable and must be sheltered, not only from work but also from participation in public life more generally; and the naturalization of expectations about ‘normal’ and universal trajectories of human development that have adult rationality as their end-point.

In fact, as scholars in the maturing field of childhood studies often argue, the intensification of ideological and cultural investments in children and childhood was and is a defining feature of modernity. Since the early 1990s, such scholars – primarily in history, sociology, anthropology and literature – have traced how ideas about children and childhood developed in fields ranging from politics, law, philosophy and science to literature. The study of music and childhood has developed over a similar period in fits and starts, initially through the work of music-education scholars adopting ethnomusicological perspectives and then through individual efforts by music historians and ethnomusicologists, who have slowly sought each other out and begun to consolidate a subfield.

I give this background because Adeline Mueller’s new book, *Mozart and the Mediation of Childhood*, marks a major milestone. It makes a compelling case for the centrality of music to the historical study of childhood, and it shows clearly how rethinking familiar music history through the lens of childhood can reveal striking new insights. Mueller demonstrates that music was not simply one more domain that was swept along by the social, political and ideological revolutions at the turn of the nineteenth century, but in fact that music was at the centre of the emergence of what we now recognize as the concept of the modern child. *Mozart and the Mediation of Childhood* is a nuanced, rigorous and thoughtful exploration of a broad range of fields in which Mozart – as a public figure and as an individual actor – was central to specific pivotal transformations in the European understanding of children and childhood.

Mueller makes this case very effectively in her first chapter, which argues that modern childhood was understood very early on as a public identity, forged in and through the circulation of texts. This is an important claim, in part because modern ideologies of the public sphere emphasized rationality and the sublimation of individual particularity into the abstractions of textual circulation – qualities that were quite explicitly associated with maturity and adulthood (in addition, of course, to racial and gender hierarchies). So while Mueller shows that, as a child, Mozart was a public spectacle who influenced ideas about what childhood is or could be, her argument is much more significant than simply an account of representation and changing ideas about capabilities (that is, since this one child can do X, perhaps other children can as well). Rather, for Mueller,

the key thing about Mozart was his status as a child composer. She shows that Mozart's contemporary reception emphasized his status as a composer whose works circulated in print, unlike previous child prodigies, including his own sister, whose performance abilities (and thus their embodied particularity) were the focus of attention. While performance ability could be interpreted as the expression of passion or instinct, circulating one's works in print required one to participate in an ideology of reason that abstracts from individual particularity. Mueller points out, for example, that 'the arbiter' of Mozart's ability 'was not his Empress, but the international public' (32) – the sort of shift from a definite person to an abstract collective that is characteristic of modern publicness.

Here is where the 'mediation' in Mueller's title takes on its key meaning, as it is precisely by his participation in the public sphere of print that Mozart not only performed, but also demonstrated the possibility of a particularly modern form of childhood, one that could participate, and even thrive, in these mediated and abstract spaces of public circulation. As Mueller says, 'Mozart's mediation through printed music became "the condition of possibility" for the mediation of childhood itself' (4). I think this is a significant claim that convincingly supports Mueller's case that Mozart was a key figure in the transformation of modern childhood, on a par with (adult) figures such as Locke, Rousseau and Wordsworth. And it suggests, in fact, that while the public sphere was ideologically framed as mature, the mediation of childhood has a history that is as long as the history of the public sphere itself. Music is critical here, precisely because it exceeds and diffuses the assumed rationality of language, suggesting that childhood's publicness was always, to use Lauren Berlant's formulation, 'intimate' (Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008)).

Mueller's argument not only demonstrates the importance of music to the history of childhood, it also locates a particular child – the young Mozart – as a central actor in that history. That is, while Mozart's youth has been widely explored as part of music history, Mueller's insight is to recognize Mozart's influence on the history of childhood per se. While childhood scholars have recently given a lot of attention to child writers in particular, I am not aware of historical accounts that claim such a transformational role for any other individual child in this history. In fact, I am surprised in retrospect that Mozart has not been the subject of precisely this sort of attention by scholars investigating the history of childhood. Mueller's account is novel and innovative, but also, in the manner of the best arguments, it is completely intuitive. After reading it, it is hard to remember that Mozart's centrality to this history was not always commonly acknowledged.

Mueller's subsequent chapters trace Mozart's role in a range of institutions of childhood, including state-supported educational and child-welfare institutions, child theatrical performers and music publishing for children. These chapters reflect rigorous and careful research, and they flesh out the breadth of Mozart's involvement in the rapidly changing institutions of childhood. My question here is whether Mozart is simply along for the ride – participating in, and perhaps encouraging, a developing social current – or if his engagement itself had the same sort of transformational impact that Mueller shows he had in the mediation of childhood through print. These chapters show that Mozart was used opportunistically by government officials to legitimate and publicize their new child-focused institutions, and they show that Mozart's music for children and engagement with child actors participated in changing ideas about childhood. But it is less clear to me whether they make a case that Mozart's participation was a causal factor, or even a necessary or important influence. That is, Mozart appears not so much as an influence or agent as a relatively passive participant in a society that is changing around him. This is an important contrast with the first chapter, which makes a much stronger case for Mozart's specific influence on these changing social norms. That said, it would be a lot to ask for a single celebrity composer to be a causal force in the development of state educational bureaucracies, and Mueller's history certainly confirms that Mozart played a meaningful part.

Mueller's fifth chapter, about Mozart's instrumental music for siblings, parents and children, is remarkable. The author looks in particular at the composer's four-hand piano music as 'a form of musical family portrait, and also as an opportunity to rehearse the new ideal of the affectionate family' (143). The idealization of parental love for children and the valorization of the affectionate nuclear family as a key social institution were at the core of the new modern ideology of childhood. Mozart's four-hand piano music staged these relationships musically, providing consumers with scripts for interaction between family members to achieve this new ideal, while also providing historians with a certain kind of evidence of intimate familial interactions – especially of the activities of child participants that would otherwise go unrecorded in the archive. If the previous chapters largely focus on representations of children, this chapter masterfully creates a lens for seeing the involvement of children themselves in this new world of idealized childhood.

One of the challenges of scholarship on music and childhood has been that, by necessity, it has largely focused on music in marginal, and aesthetically devalued, contexts – schools, playgrounds, nurseries, consumer industries and highly commercialized popular culture. In one sense, this has been an important contribution, by pushing musicology into new settings and contexts. But it has also meant that such scholarship has long had a marginal relationship to music research more generally. By showing so convincingly how a major artist at the centre of Western art music is also defined by, and in his own way defined, childhood itself, Mueller's book offers the tantalizing possibility of bringing childhood to the centre of discussions. *Mozart and the Mediation of Childhood* is an exceptional work of careful history and creative interpretation, and it deserves to be read widely both by music scholars and childhood scholars.

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