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Defending the truth of Mozart’s age (10 May 1765)

Dexter Edge and David Black

***The Public Advertiser*, no. 9323, Fri, 10 May 1765, [2]**

To the Printer of the Public Advertiser.

S I R,

EMULATION among People endowed with particular Talents, while it is contained within the Bounds of Decency and Good-manners, is not less rational than advantageous to the Parties concerned; but when by Success of peculiar Merit it degenerates into Envy, there cannot be a more abhorred Principle.

I have been led into this Remark by the ungenerous Proceedings of some People, who have not been ashamed to attempt every thing to the Prejudice of one, whose Excellency in the Knowledge of his Art, is not more wonderful than the early Time of Life he has attained to it. I mean the little German Boy *Wolfgang Mozart*, whose great Abilities, both as a Performer on the Harpsichord and as a Composer, are now so well known to the Public, that the utmost Malice of his Defamers cannot deny them. Therefore what they cannot deduce from Matter of Fact, they labour to depreciate by positive Falsehood; and while they reluctantly allow the Merit of his Performance, they assert it is not the Performance of a Child—a Child Eight Years of Age, but of a Man—a Man reduced by some Defect of Nature to an Insignificancy of Person, which conceals from the careless Observer his more advanced Age.—That he is now in his fifteenth, his twentieth or his thirtieth Year, according as the Spirit of his Opponents think fit to place

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him.

It would be natural to imagine the Absurdity of these malevolent Remarks would carry with it such strong and evident Confutation, that nothing more need be said to enforce it. Those who have seen the Child and honoured him with their unprejudiced Attention, require no Arguments to clear away the Falsehood; but to prevent the Propagation of this Calumny, the Father, as an honest Man and in Vindication of his injured Offspring, thinks it his Duty to declare he can produce such ample Testimony of the Child's Nativity as would convince the most doubting, and at the same time acquit him of any Intention of exhibiting to the Public the Fallacies of an Impostor.

Yours, &c.

RECTO RECTIOR.

To the Printer of the Public Advertiſer.

SIR,

EMULATION among People endowed with particular Talents, while it is contained within the Bounds of Decency and Good-manners, is not leſs rational than advantageous to the Parties concerned; but when by Succeſs of peculiar Merit it degenerates into Envy, there cannot be a more abhorred Principle.

I have been led into this Remark by the ungenerous Proceedings of ſome People, who have not been aſhamed to attempt every thing to the Prejudice of one, whoſe Excellency in the Knowledge of his Art, is not more wonderful than the early Time of Life he has attained to it. I mean the little German Boy *Wolfgang Mozart*, whoſe great Abilities, both as a Performer on the Harpſichord and as a Compoſer, are now ſo well known to the Public, that the utmoſt Malice of his Deſamers cannot deny them. Therefore what they cannot deduce from Matter of Fact, they labour to depreciate by poſitive Falſehood; and while they reluctantly allow the Merit of his Performance, they aſſert it is not the Performance of a Child—a Child Eight Years of Age, but of a Man—a Man reduced by ſome Defect of Nature to an Inſignificancy of Perſon, which conceals from the careleſs Obſerver his more advanced Age.—That he is now in his fifteenth, his twentieth or his thirtieth Year, according as the Spirit of his Opponents think fit to place him.

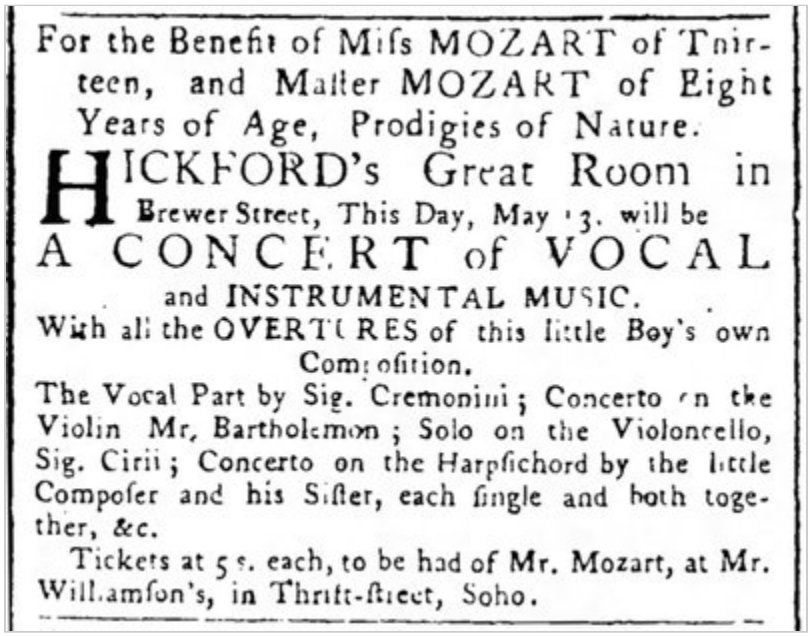
It would be natural to imagine the Abſurdity of theſe malevolent Remarks would carry with it ſuch ſtrong and evident Confutation, that nothing more need be ſaid to enforce it: Thoſe who have ſeen the Child and honoured him with their unprejudiced Attention, require no Arguments to clear away the Falſehood; but to prevent the Propagation of this Calumny, the Father, as an honeſt Man and in Vindication of his injured Offspring, thinks it his Duty to declare he can produce ſuch ample Teſtimony of the Child's Nativity as would convince the moſt doubting, and at the ſame time acquit him of any Intention of exhibiting to the Public the Fallacies of an Impoſtor.

Yours, &c.

RECTO RECTIOR.

Commentary

This letter to *The Public Advertiser* in London defending the truth of Mozart's age was published on Fri, 10 May 1765. The Mozarts had been in the city for more than a year by this point (they had arrived on 23 Apr 1764), and Wolfgang had appeared three times at court and three times in public (most recently at the Mozarts' benefit concert on 21 Feb 1765). He had also made an unknown number of private appearances. (For the children's participation in a private concert given by Lady Margaret Clive, see our entry for 13 Mar 1765.) This letter on Wolfgang's age was published three days before the Mozarts' final public benefit concert in London, on 13 May in Hickford's Great Room; in fact, an advertisement for that concert appears on the first page of the same issue of *The Public Advertiser* as the letter. The letter was found by Ilias Chrissochoidis, who published an article about it in *The Musical Time*s in 2010.



For the Benefit of Miſs MOZART of Thirteen, and Maſter MOZART of Eight Years of Age, Prodigies of Nature.

HICKFORD's Great Room in Brewer Street, This Day, May 13. will be

A CONCERT of VOCAL and INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC.

With all the OVERTURES of this little Boy's own Compoſition.

The Vocal Part by Sig. Cremonini; Concerto on the Violin Mr. Bartholemon; Solo on the Violoncello, Sig. Cirii; Concerto on the Harpſichord by the little Compoſer and his Siſter, each ſingle and both together, &c.

Tickets at 5 s. each, to be had of Mr. Mozart, at Mr. Williamſon's, in Thrift-ſtreet, Soho.

Advertisement for the Mozarts' concert on 13 May 1765
The Public Advertiser, Mon, 13 May 1765, [1]
(newspapers.com)

The letter's author remains unknown; it is signed with the Latin pseudonym "Recto Rectior." The use of pseudonyms in published letters of this sort was common at the time; for example, a letter on London opera published in *The Public Advertiser* on 19 Mar 1766 is signed "Amphion", and a long letter on mothers published in *Pope's Bath Chronicle* on 20 Sep 1764 is signed "Parthenia." The phrase "recto rectior" can be loosely translated as "righter than right".

The letter by "Recto Rectior" was almost certainly not written by Leopold Mozart, whose English was probably still relatively rudimentary, and there is no reason to think that he would have been capable of writing in such a polished style. But the author indicates that the letter was written at Leopold's behest in order to defend his son's honor, and he states that Leopold offered to provide documentary proof of Wolfgang's age. We can only speculate about the identity of the

actual author: by this point, the Mozarts had met a great many people in London, including many well-educated native speakers of English. One possibility is Daines Barrington, who examined Wolfgang in June 1765 (not long after the publication of this letter), but delayed the submission of his findings to the Royal Society until 1769, ostensibly because he had been awaiting documentary confirmation from Salzburg of the date of the boy's birth (Barrington 1771; *Dokumente*, 86–92).

The letter is responding to those who have expressed doubt at the truth of Wolfgang's claimed age. The author writes that some had suggested that Wolfgang was actually much older than he appeared; the implication, in modern terms, is that Wolfgang was an adult midget. At present, we have no other direct documentary evidence from the time expressing such doubts, although it is certainly plausible that there might have been skepticism, given Wolfgang's unprecedented abilities and his diminutive size, small even for his age. Barrington reports that he himself "could not help suspecting his father imposed with regard to the real age of the boy" and that "most of the London musicians were of the same opinion with regard to his age, not believing it possible that a child of so tender years could surpass most of the masters in that science" (Barrington 1771, 62; *Dokumente*, 90). The timing of the letter in *The Public Advertiser* may have been motivated in part by a desire to diminish the impact of skeptical rumors on attendance at the Mozarts' concert on 13 May.

Wolfgang is said in the letter to be "Eight Years of Age", but had in fact turned 9 on 27 Jan 1765. When the Mozarts were in Paris, the ages of both children had consistently been reported as one year less than their true ages. We have suggested (see our entry for 21 Jan 1765) that this minor fiction could have stemmed from Baron Grimm, rather than Leopold (who is often blamed for it), but that Leopold may then have felt obliged to continue it in London rather than to appear dishonest by disavowing ages that had already been mentioned several times in print.

Whatever the case may have been, the pattern of misreported ages remains consistent in all known documents from the Mozarts' sojourn in London, with just one exception: Nannerl's age is given correctly as 13 in the notice in *The Public Advertiser* on 13 May 1765; she would turn 14 two and half months later, on 30 Jul 1765. Wolfgang's age is, however, given incorrectly as 8 in that same advertisement, and Nannerl's age is given incorrectly as 12 in every other published notice in which she is mentioned during the family's stay in London.

We are grateful to Ian Allan for helpful discussions on the possible implications of "recto rectior."

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