

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

DISCOURSES OF MUSICAL TALENT IN AMERICAN CULTURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

BY

LINDSAY JORDAN WRIGHT

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2018

To my students.

Thank you for teaching me.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements v
Abstract..... viii
List of Figures ix
List of Tables..... xi
Introduction..... 1
 Musical Talent and Discourse 4
 Scholarly Context..... 8
 Chapter Summaries 17

I. Defining Talent

A Typology of Meanings 21
 Introduction..... 21
 Talent as Innateness: Two Dominant Conceptions..... 26
 A Typology..... 34
 1. Gift 37
 2. Inheritance..... 45
 3. Potentiality..... 50
 4. Passion 56
 5. Speed..... 62
 Discourses of Talent..... 68

II. Explaining Talent

The Career of Thomas Wiggins 71
 Introduction..... 71
 Discovery / Invention..... 77
 Gift / Commodity..... 92
 Body / Soul..... 101
 Child / Prodigy..... 110
 Magic / Illusion 121
 Conclusion..... 128

III. Representing Talent

Reality Television and Discourses of Musical Ability	134
Introduction.....	134
Talent Shows and/as Educational Discourse Systems	141
A History of American Talent Shows.....	145
On Stage.....	147
On Air	149
On Screen	152
On Reality TV	154
Representing Talent on Reality TV	161
Anti-talent.....	163
Adversity	176
Affect.....	183
Conclusion.....	190

IV. Teaching Talent

The Pedagogies of Shinichi Suzuki and Mark O'Connor	194
Introduction.....	194
Shinichi Suzuki.....	203
Mark O'Connor.....	214
Teaching Talent.....	223
The First Song.....	234
Eliza.....	242
Zoe	251
Conclusion.....	259
Coda.....	267
Bibliography	272

Acknowledgements

I always read acknowledgement sections. They are capsules of context and a glimpse into the personality behind each screen of scholarly prose. To indulge a moment of meta-commentary, these sections serve as testaments against the myth of the solitary genius—as evidence that authorly achievements require many kinds of teachers, and just as many moments of struggle (not to mention multiple sources of financial support). But they are also performative gestures, not private thank-you notes. Between insipid openings confessing “it takes a village to raise a book” and long lists of proper nouns, every author sketches the background of a self-portrait—whether minimalistic, meticulous, or heaped with humble-bragging. I’ll try to strike some balance, as I do want to acknowledge the community that has shaped me. After all, it does take a village to raise a book.

To my family, Dyane Wright, David Wright, and Ann Jordan, your unconditional support and love have meant the world to me. Little did you know this is the career I would choose when you told a younger me that *performing* music would make a great avocation.

I want to extend my deepest thanks to my committee, Berthold Hoeckner, Travis A. Jackson, Philip V. Bohlman, and Seth Brodsky. I have learned many lessons from you, all of which will serve me far beyond the bounds of this dissertation. And to my co-chairs, Berthold and Travis, thank you for reading, for listening, and for seeing some “potential.”

This dissertation would never have been possible without the support and encouragement of teachers during my years at Wesleyan University. Thanks to Jane Alden for being the type of mentor I one day hope to be; to Demetrius Eudell for uncompromising expectations (for your students, and the world); to Mark Slobin for introducing me to ethnomusicology; and to Dan Leech-Wilkinson at Kings College London for a brief email postscript urging me to consider becoming a musicologist. I decided to give it a go.

The National Academy of Education and the Spencer Foundation have provided valuable fellowship funds as well as the invaluable affirmation that this project was worth an investment. To my fellow fellows, I deeply appreciate you—as generous spirits, skilled scholars, and world-changers. I am fortunate to have received additional support from the Kathy Holmes Scholarship Fund for research and travel costs. Not least, thank you to Fred and Marian Weiner as well as Jan Carpman for offering me places to stay during fieldwork trips.

The music-educational communities that have nurtured me as a teacher and motivated me to become a researcher remained a source of joy and purpose throughout this project. I am deeply grateful for every one of my students—from the School District of Philadelphia, the South Side Suzuki community, the Hyde Park Youth Symphony, my own private studios, and elsewhere. Thank you to the many music teachers who have served as mentors, colleagues, and friends, especially Meredith Aska McBride, Ria Hodgson, Isabelle Rozendaal, and Matt Shepherd.

I want to extend my gratitude to all of the teachers, parents, and students who were so generous with their thoughts and their time during my fieldwork. Ronda Cole, in many ways, this dissertation began with the first day of my “Every Child Can” course with you in 2012. Thank you for teaching me, and for your open mind and open heart. David Strom and Chris Sanchez, thank you for your willingness to talk and for sharing your teaching with me—I cannot wait to continue working on this project well beyond the narrow scope of Chapter 4. And to Pamela Wiley, thank you: for your time and your energy, and for your wisdom and infectious passion for teaching.

Numerous friends and colleagues have served as writing companions, sounding boards, and indefatigable feedback-givers as this project has taken shape. Thank you to not one, but two reading groups who read many drafts: Brad Spiers, Liz Hopkins, Dan Wang, Tien-Tien Jong, Chaz Lee, Zach Loeffler, and Berthold Hoeckner; as well as Joe Maurer, Will Buckingham, Laura Turner, and Mike Allemana. Thank you to John Lawrence for always being willing to read and to tell the truth.

Everyone who attended workshops at the many iterations of the Music History and Theory Workshop and Ethnoise provided invaluable comments and questions. Thank you to Emily Richmond Pollock and Robin Scheffler for much-needed MIT writing sessions, and for the many conversations in between.

I am grateful for the many other relationships that have nourished me during my time at the University of Chicago. Thank you to my cohort—George Adams, Will Buckingham, Nadia Chana, Ted Gordon, Julianne Grasso, Anabel Maler, Ameera Nimjee, Jess Peritz, and Braxton Shelley—for sharing ideas, porch dinners, venting sessions, and so many other moments of this journey. These thanks extend well beyond my cohort: to Abigail Fine, Chelsea Burns, Maria Welch, Mari Jo Velasco, Rehanna Kheshgi, Tim Page, Pierce Gradone, and Jonah Bloch-Johnson, and many others. Barbara Schubert, thank you for all of the music—your strength, passion, and mentorship has meant so much to me. Braxton Shelley: listen. Thank you for telling me to choose UChicago during a prospective student library tour six years ago, and thank you for everything since: writing dates, dinner dates, check-ins, reality checks, laugh breaks.

Daniel, thank you for your abiding support—the long runs, your terrible puns, and for making sure that I eat more than ice cream for days on end. I am so lucky to have you in my life.

I have saved mentioning several brilliant and resilient women I met through this program for last. I cannot do justice to everything you mean to me, so I will simply offer up your names: Nadia Chana, Liz Hopkins, Kate Pukinskis, Laura Turner, and Meredith Aska McBride. Thank you.

Abstract

The concept of “talent” pervades American musical discourses. Although talent is recognized as a desirable attribute, its meaning is not fixed; as a signifier, it floats. In this dissertation, I contend that the privilege to determine what musical talent means—and who gets to be called talented—is an opportunity that reflects and grants social power, rendering the concept a highly consequential site of struggle. Across the dissertation’s four chapters, I analyze discourses from the last two centuries and bring previously disconnected musicological, educational, critical, and scientific literature into conversation. In the first chapter, “Defining Talent,” I disentangle the separate and often contradictory meanings the concept has accrued through a typology that parses its five core meanings: as a gift, as inheritance, as potentiality, as passion, and as speed. The remainder of the dissertation presents three case studies, using their triangulation to understand a broader American discursive terrain. In “Explaining Talent,” I examine receptions of the late nineteenth-century African American pianist Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins, whose performances exposed contradictions at the heart of racialized constructions of musicality during this era. In “Representing Talent,” I argue that the producers and judges of twenty-first century talent competition programs broadcast meanings of talent that foreground and manipulate affective responses while reinforcing myths of meritocracy. Finally, in “Teaching Talent,” I draw upon historical research and ethnographic fieldwork with two pedagogical communities (informed by the Suzuki and O’Connor methods, respectively) to demonstrate how differing beliefs about natural ability influence students’ access to social and cultural capital. Overall, the dissertation encourages scholars and educators to approach “musical talent” as a construction that is as heterogeneous and contingent as the concept of “music” itself.

List of Figures

1.1	Giftedness conceived as a binary versus a normal distribution.....	44
1.2	A two-dimensional map of talent’s meanings.....	69
2.1	General Bethune and Blind Tom.....	71
2.2	Early advertisement for Wiggins’ performance in the <i>Atlanta Daily Intelligencer</i>	84
2.3	Performance program, Springfield, Illinois, 1869.....	114
2.4	Circus Poster: “What is It?”.....	125
3.1	Adrian Romoff in <i>America’s Got Talent</i>	134
3.2	Star Theater amateur night advertisement, from <i>Milwaukee Free Press</i>	149
3.3	Chris Weaver Blind Audition, <i>The Voice</i> Season 13.....	162
3.4	Dave the Horn Guy, <i>America’s Got Talent</i> Season 1.....	172
3.5	David Francisco on <i>American Idol</i>	181
3.6	Kechi Okwuchi on <i>America’s Got Talent</i>	181
3.7	Judges displaying their experiences of frisson.....	186
3.8	Blurred boundaries between recognizing musical talent and experiencing love.....	188
4.1	PhoenixPhest Suzuki Institute (Eastern Michigan University).....	194
4.2	“Gavotte Spot” in one of Ronda Cole’s reference copies of Book 1.....	209
4.3	The site of Pamela Wiley’s Jacksonboro Fiddle Club.....	226
4.4	The first variations in the Suzuki and O’Connor method books.....	236
4.5	Twinkle variations; first three variations in O’Connor’s Book 1.....	236
4.6	Making a foot chart.....	243
4.7	Eliza’s first note using bow and violin.....	243
4.8	Zoe’s first notes (bow hand).....	253
4.9	Zoe’s first notes (violin hand).....	253

4.10 Word frequencies in Ronda Cole's and Pamela Wiley's language use.....262

List of Tables

1.1	Changing definitions of talent.....	33
1.2	Five core meanings of talent.....	36

Introduction

It was only around nine on Wednesday morning, and Nasir had just punched Daequan in the face.¹ Ten string students and I were starting class in my second-floor music room at Dr. Ethel Allen school in north Philadelphia when it happened.² A few drops of blood dripped from the eighth grader's nose and landed on the dirty tile floor. For a moment, everyone in the room stood there stunned in (rare) silence under the faintly buzzing florescent lights, and I deliberated about how to react. On one hand, I had to show Nasir and the other students that his outburst was unacceptable in my classroom, and that there are better ways to resolve a conflict. But on the other hand, I needed to address the beliefs, and evidently deep feelings, behind the boys' surprising dispute.

The exchange had started when Nasir took out his cello and boastfully played a clumsy rendition of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" melody, which I had assigned to the class the previous week. Daequan, who had forgotten his cello so many times that I only allowed him to practice during school hours, likely envied his friend's progress (whether consciously or not) and began to make fun of him. "What a good little cello student," he said in a mocking "white teacher" voice. "Look at you, going home to practice—because you don't got no *real* talent." Nasir, forced to defend his dignity after this public affront, stood up to face Daequan, who was significantly taller. "I ain't practicing, I just *got* it. This jawn's easy."³ Daequan, still on the offensive, told Nasir that he had seen him taking his cello home on the bus. Nasir countered, telling Daequan that he was just jealous because he was tone deaf and would obviously never be good at music. The skirmish escalated quickly and Nasir,

¹ The names in this vignette are pseudonyms. It is also important to mention that while this memory is still vivid in my mind, I am recalling everything without extensive notes after about 7 years; I offer this recollection because it served as a formative episode in my own curiosity about musical talent.

² Ethel Allen was located in the "Strawberry Mansion" neighborhood of Philadelphia. <https://philadelphianeighborhoods.com/2009/06/25/strawberry-mansion-the-view-from-the-street/>. Here is some information on the school as of this writing, which resembles its statistics from the early 2010s: <https://greatphillyschools.org/schools/dr-ethel-d-allen-promise-academy>

³ Regarding the word "jawn," see "Some Jawn About 'Jawn,'" accessed June 19, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/jawn-meaning-origin>.

more offended and embarrassed about having practiced than I had anticipated, threw a sudden punch. I had been so bewildered and captivated by the terms of the argument that I had not stepped in quickly enough.

There were morals to this story. First, I realized that I needed to develop a more watertight practice policy and classroom management system. But more substantially, I discovered these students' deep investment in being declared—and feeling—talented, innately gifted, naturally able. I learned that, for many of them, practice represented a futile endeavor: their experiences at this notoriously underperforming school had seemingly demonstrated that those with “talent” did not need to work to keep up, and those without it were essentially impervious to its benefits.⁴ While these values around homework and practicing were ubiquitous in the school's culture, I think my classes, which addressed not only the relatively unfamiliar undertaking of music performance but also performance on European classical instruments, offered an extreme case that amplified the students' impressions about ability development. Very few had been provided an opportunity to consider the myriad skills required to play something like the cello; most had never seen a classical musician live or heard much classical music, aside from occasional film soundtracks or older peers in the school's struggling music program.⁵ Moreover, practicing instruments at home was not only logistically difficult and seemingly futile, but often acted as a form of negative cultural capital in this school's entirely African American population, which possessed (at best) a conflicted relationship

⁴ This line of logic aligns with Henry Kingsbury's observation (discussed further in the following pages) about understandings of talent in a music conservatory setting, despite its cultural differences from the context of these eighth graders learning cello in a poorly funded public school: “In recalling conversations with my former Midland colleagues regarding whether or not music could truly be taught, it has more than once occurred to me that the dynamics of talent entail the irony that in music education, it is the talented few who can be taught that which may in the end be unteachable.” Henry Kingsbury, *Music Talent & Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 60.

⁵ Of course, many students were members of communities that engaged in various forms of live music-making. These experiences, however, did not specifically prepare students for the sonic and cultural norms cultivated by musicians in European classical contexts.

with European American cultural practices, not to mention a significant percentage of students whose families belonged to the Nation of Islam.⁶

As a new teacher, I had not anticipated these challenges or done much to address such understandings about the cultivation of musical ability. At the beginning of the school year, I had been encouraged by other instrumental music teachers to perform aptitude tests that would determine which small percentage of students would be given the “privilege” of being pulled out of class once a week to learn an instrument. Moreover, thanks to this common music education pull-out model, I needed to obtain permission from students’ classroom teachers to enroll them in my class, which resulted in only the highest academically achieving students (who could also match pitch and replicate complex rhythms) being allowed to participate in my program.⁷ These gatekeeping systems—aptitude tests, and the need to receive permission to pull students out of class—further rewarded students who already had opportunities to develop essential academic and social-emotional skills like self-regulation, self-management, and the cultivation of a growth mindset.⁸ My students were some of the most “talented learners” in the school, as one of the interlocutors of the dissertation’s final chapter might put it. And yet, two of them had just gotten into a fistfight over whether they were so naturally gifted that they did not need to practice.

⁶ There is not adequate space here to discuss classical music’s complex place within the various African American communities in which I taught in Philadelphia, but there was indeed anything but consensus on its significance and role. For instance, some Nation of Islam parents requested that their children be removed from the violin program; others (perhaps more in line with the approach of Louis Farrakhan, who has played the violin throughout his life) subscribed to a more traditional uplift model, embracing the opportunity for their children to access this form of cultural capital.

⁷ This system also clearly demonstrates music education’s position in the school’s curricular hierarchy. In addition to the fact that only around a tenth of Ethel Allen students would be given an opportunity to study instrumental music, the music teacher was essentially denied autonomy in choosing which students would be enrolled, implying that music is superfluous rather than educationally profitable.

⁸ These terms are a few examples of areas of research within increasingly popular field of social-emotional learning (SEL) research. CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) defines SEL as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” “What Is SEL?” Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, accessed June 18, 2018, <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>. Further, arts education contexts have been gaining increasing attention for their ability to address these “non-academic” skills. For instance, see our forthcoming paper, Steven Shewfelt et al., “Arts Education and Socio-Emotional Learning Outcomes among K-12 Students: Developing a Theory of Action,” White paper (Ingenuity, Forthcoming).

I present this vignette as a window into the lived experiences that precipitated my curiosity about musical talent as a concept, as an identity, as an ideology. Throughout my teaching experiences at Ethel Allen and other schools, I wondered: what social and systemic forces led Nasir and Daequan to believe that talent was such an innate and immutable possession? How did these understandings influence my students' learning in school, their lives outside of school, their various musicking experiences? Why was the question of innate ability situated so powerfully at the forefront of their minds in the first place? To what degree were these constructions of *musical* talent unique? These are the questions that propelled me to embark upon this project.

Musical Talent and Discourse

In this dissertation, I investigate the concept of musical talent in American culture: its historical root systems, its changing range of meanings, and its role in systems of privilege and oppression. I focus on American musical discourses in the last two centuries, a historical span of inquiry with an intentionally blurry lower limit and an abrupt cut-off at the present day. Most broadly, I argue that musical “talent” operates as a floating signifier. Thus, “talent” is granted a range of contingent meanings—as a constant site of discursive struggle rather than an immutable object of discourse grounded in a set of seemingly objective facts. In other words, musical talent is “more like a language than it is like the way in which we are biologically constituted,” as Stuart Hall commented in a related analysis of race as a floating signifier.⁹ Each of the dissertation’s chapters offers a unique glimpse into the processes of such struggles over musical talent’s meanings—over who gets to be categorized as “talented.” In each of these contexts, I analyze the ways conceptions of musical talent operate in discourse, as well as the ways prevailing conceptions are resisted, revised, and manipulated. In the end, I demonstrate how the most dominant conceptions have operated as a

⁹ Sut Jhally, Stuart Hall, and Media Education Foundation, *Race: The Floating Signifier* (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997).

form of discursive erasure, of historical and cultural silencing, which perpetuates unequal power relations within American systems of cultural hegemony.¹⁰

I approach this intentionally broad research agenda through the lens of three case studies that triangulate talent's social functions from different vantage points.¹¹ The subsequent chapters reveal meaningful patterns in how understandings about the development of musical ability have circulated within and especially between American discourses—educational, scholarly, pop-cultural, political. The current body of scholarship about musical talent is, to be sure, not a single entity, but an incongruent assemblage further segregated by discipline-specific terminology. This project aims, therefore, to traverse these specialized discourses and to consider the ways they interact, combine, and struggle against one another in musical encounters. Through engaging with this range of discourses, I hope to provide a common ground that allows them to interact with more intention and context, and communicate more effectively across disciplinary barriers.

Rather than engaging in ontological debates over whether exceptional musical ability is more a result of “nature” or “nurture,” my research takes a more epistemological and phenomenological tack. That is, it is not concerned with whether a musical performer's success or greatness (however defined) resulted from some proportion of genetic, epigenetic, or divinely bestowed natural advantages. Instead, I aim to investigate the multitudinous ways that musical talent has been conceived, perceived, performed, and experienced: in short, the ways it functions as discourse. This is the distinction expressed in the first part of the dissertation's title, “Discourses of Musical Talent.”

¹⁰ I am thinking of “silencing” in a sonic sense (the silencing of many moments of musical practice), a social sense (the musical silencing of voices not deemed talented enough to merit musical education, as the opening anecdote describes), and in a historical sense, as discussed in Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995).

¹¹ This intentional breadth is one of the dissertation's chief contributions, as most examinations of (musical) talent have been highly context- and discipline-specific and do not speak to the larger trends and discursive circulations the project aims to address.

If discourses are particular ways of understanding and describing the world, my project investigates the ways talent operates as what James Gee has called “big D” Discourse (as opposed to specific stretches of language-in-use, or “little d” discourse).¹² These broad discourses are co-constituted by the individual identities that participate in them. As Gee explains, “Each of us is a member of many Discourses and each Discourse represents one of our ever multiple identities.”¹³ Importantly, within each of these discourses, some localized, some systemic, some oppressive, there is a shared understanding of what is “normal” and what is “common sense,” to summon Antonio Gramsci’s well-known expression.¹⁴ Gramsci, and later, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, pointed out the ways that these different “big D” discourses do not exist as equals, but struggle for dominance within a hegemonic system controlled by the ideologies of a ruling class.¹⁵ As I discuss in Chapter 1, some discourses of talent operate within a larger hegemonic system; they are more widely understood as “common sense” and they are included in dictionaries, and others aim to comment upon or directly challenge these meanings.¹⁶ In the case of Nasir and Daequan, their common understanding of musical talent involved the unyielding matter of its innateness, and its essential mutual-exclusivity from the process of practicing. In their understanding, musical talent was not only innate, but it was locked into a much grander and more consequential chain of signifiers, and the boys felt that their identity within this chain was worth fighting for, and fighting over. For Nasir and Daequan, musical talent signified some type of natural superiority, and this type of superiority

¹² Marianne W. Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (SAGE, 2002), 1. James Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (Routledge, 2014).

¹³ James Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses* (Routledge, 2015), ix. While I generally ascribe Gee’s definition of Discourse, I do not capitalize it in the dissertation in order to gesture towards other non-capitalized uses of the term.

¹⁴ Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (International Publishers, 1971).

¹⁵ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards A Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso Books, 2014).

¹⁶ The concept of “ideology” enters into the following chapters’ discussions, as well. While I generally intend the term simply to mean a system of ideas, beliefs, and theories that belong to a particular discourse, I acknowledge that such idea and belief systems can be more or less “ideological” in the more specifically Marxian sense, as a mechanism of false consciousness. I have intended to be clear about the meaning I am summoning in each context.

signified intellectual and physical ease, a certain status within their social group, and perhaps the future promise of upward social mobility.

As this example illustrates, the case of musical ability represents an especially charged—but, I argue, not fundamentally exceptional—example of discourses of talent more broadly. Indeed, the process of musical ability development has consistently been approached as exceptional, from Plato’s emphasis on the holistic significance of musical education in *The Republic* to contemporary debates over the academic and “non-academic” benefits of music and the arts in American educational systems.¹⁷ Although this project is more a music-centered case study than a comparative investigation of talent more broadly, the diversity of skills required for expertise in composing, improvising, performing, or even listening to music (not to mention the vast range of musical traditions and genres that might be considered under this conceptual umbrella in American cultural contexts) renders musical ability especially and uniquely susceptible to naturalizing ideologies. In other words, musicking can be creative and imitative, athletic and intellectual, disciplined and liberating, vocal and instrumental, manual and electronic, literate and orally transmitted; and a range of other possibilities. Because of the cultural, pedagogical, and biological diversity musical expertise involves, then, onlookers have often been unable to identify (and identify with) the exact ways musical performers develop their skills, or the exact mental processes they undergo to do what they do. Over the last two centuries, many of these onlookers began to fantasize, metaphorize, imagine, and otherwise speculate about the presence of innate gifts, magic, God-given gifts, or genius.¹⁸

¹⁷ Here, I intend “exceptional” literally, as an exception to the rules around skill development—for instance, in comparison to reading skills, or cooking skills. Regarding this discussion of music education in *The Republic*, Plato explained, “Education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it.” Cited in Michael L. Mark, *Source Readings in Music Education History* (Schirmer Books, 1982), 12. Regarding contemporary debates over music and the arts within broader American educational discourses, see Ruben A. Gaztambide-Fernandez, “Why the Arts Don’t ‘Do’ Anything: Toward a New Vision for Cultural Production in Education,” *Harvard Educational Review* 83, no. 1 (2013): 211–37.

¹⁸ The case of musical savants offers an extreme example of this exceptionalizing and naturalizing tendency. As Oliver Sacks, Joseph Straus, and others have discussed, while savants are only generally thought to possess expertise in a few special areas (chess, math, or music, for instance), these memory- and system-oriented areas of specialization are but a

Scholarly Context

As I noted above, the branches of scholarship that directly and indirectly address American conceptions of musical talent are both vast and heterogeneous—more like a swath of forest than something emanating from a single disciplinary or ideological tree. Here, I visit literature from three scholarly discourses upon which this project builds: psychological, musicological, educational. The following chapter examines meanings of talent across a much more expansive palette of American discourses, academic and otherwise.

The classification of human abilities and potentialities was elemental in the founding of psychology as a modern discipline, and the axiom that human differences are something objectively definable enough to be classified and tested still guides much research within the discipline. Francis Galton, who invented the concept of correlation, introduced surveys as a method of data collection, and was the first to apply statistical methods to the study of human differences, also authored the first investigation of talent in experimental psychology. This book, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences*, argued that exceptional human abilities (including musical ones) were not randomly distributed or the result of a superior education, but hereditary.¹⁹ The implications of Galton's seminal study were broad, as I show in Chapter 1. Ensuing investigations into musical talent corresponded with broader efforts to more specifically measure and predict intelligence, classify forms of exceptionalism, and discern “supernormal,” (which in the twentieth century became “gifted” and “talented”) children from those without such perceived endowments.²⁰ After Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon developed their sliding scale of intelligence in 1905, the American

small percentage of those savants pursue. Rather, they merely “attract general interest because they are in a culturally valued area and undertaken at a high level of proficiency.” In other words, music is not “naturally” an exceptional, isolated category of expertise mastered by some inexplicable process that only neurologically gifted or atypical people can access; it is merely discursively positioned as such.

¹⁹ Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* (Macmillan, 1869).

²⁰ James H. Borland, “The Construct of Giftedness,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 72 (1997): 7.

psychologist Lewis Terman established the intelligence quotient system still commonly invoked today. Influential studies like Henry Goddard's *Psychology of the Normal and Subnormal* and Leta Stetter Hollingsworth's *Gifted Children* were quickly translated to educational contexts, where children were tested and tracked according to their different perceived capabilities.²¹

The American psychologist and music educator Carl Seashore developed the first prominent musical iteration of such tests, advocating for the identification of exceptional musical aptitude in children. As Seashore argued, reflecting the contention of *Hereditary Talent* five decades earlier,

Musical talent, like all other talent, is a gift of nature—inherited, not acquired; in so far as a musician has natural ability in music, he has been born with it. Perhaps natural ability of a high order is not so very rare, for modern psychology has demonstrated that a surprisingly small portion of our talents are allowed to develop and come to fruition, and thus has given great reinforcement to the dictum that many men 'die with all their music in them.'²²

Musical talent's distinctiveness from other abilities and aptitudes was already established at this stage of psychological research; it was discussed as one of the most clearly inherited and quickly evident physical characteristics. For instance, the Eugenics Office of 1927 listed musical aptitude among other observable, immutable, (seemingly) inherited conditions. The list begins: "(1) Musical Talent, (2) Tuberculosis, (3) Harelip and Cleft Palate, (4) Hair Form, Hair and Eye Color, and Complexion, (5) Stature, (6) Weight, (7) Physical Measurement Record."²³ Two years later, eugenicist Paul Popenoe's research into artistic aptitudes surveyed a range of contemporary research and concluded, "no other form of special talent in the entire range of human achievement can show such a record of early appearance of genius as does music."²⁴ While Popenoe's field of eugenics declined rapidly after the 1930s, the underlying understanding that musical ability was heritable and

²¹ Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon, *The Development of Intelligence in Children: (The Binet-Simon Scale)* (Williams & Wilkins, 1916). Henry Herbert Goddard, *Psychology of the Normal and Subnormal* (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1919); Leta Stetter Hollingsworth, *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture* (Macmillan, 1929).

²² Carl Emil Seashore, *The Measurement of Musical Talent* (G. Schirmer, 1915), 1.

²³ As quoted in Linda De Roche, *The Jazz Age: A Historical Exploration of Literature* (ABC-CLIO, 2015), 220.

²⁴ Paul Popenoe, "The Inheritance of Artistic Talents," *Journal of Heredity* 20, no. 9 (September 1929): 415.

innate and therefore inaccessible to certain individuals has persisted in American social consciousness.²⁵

Although psychological research into musical ability development has gained increased nuance in the ensuing decades, the “nature” or “nurture” question, a dichotomy coined by Galton, is still hotly debated.²⁶ Anders Ericsson, Ralf Krampe, and Clemens Teschroemer famously found that “many characteristics once believed to reflect innate talent are actually the result of intense practice extended for a minimum of 10 years” (research that popular science writer Malcom Gladwell glossed as “the 10,000 hour rule”), but the study was soon challenged.²⁷ In 2014, for instance, Meriam Mosing et al. conducted a twin study on musical ability, finding it to be “substantially heritable (40%–70%)” rather than a result of cultivation.²⁸ The same year, Brooke Macnamara, David Hambrick, and Frederick Oswald performed a meta-analysis of recent research on individual differences to learn whether the “deliberate practice” highlighted in Ericsson’s research was generally found to be responsible for expert performance, concluding that only 21% of the variances in musical performance could be attributed to practice (cultivation).²⁹

Amid these debates, the scientific community generally acknowledges that nature and nurture are falsely antagonistic categories, and that genes and environment constantly interact in ways that cannot be reduced to such simple causal narratives.³⁰ These discourses, however, are often

²⁵ For a thorough discussion of the disappearance and legacy of eugenics in America, see Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (Dialog Press, 2012).

²⁶ For an exchange that summarizes this debate, see Sloboda and Howe’s 1991 assertion that the influences of exceptional skills are primarily environmental, and Gagne’s rebuttal that the environment is only responsible for a fraction of such successes. Summarized in Francois Gagne, “Nature or Nurture? A Re-Examination of Sloboda and Howe’s (1991) Interview Study on Talent Development in Music,” *Psychology of Music* 27, no. 1 (April 1, 1999): 38–51.

²⁷ K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf T. Krampe, and Clemens Teschroemer, “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance,” 2010.

²⁸ Miriam A. Mosing et al., “Practice Does Not Make Perfect No Causal Effect of Music Practice on Music Ability,” *Psychological Science*, July 30, 2014.

²⁹ Brooke N. Macnamara, David Z. Hambrick, and Frederick L. Oswald, “Deliberate Practice and Performance in Music, Games, Sports, Education, and Professions A Meta-Analysis,” *Psychological Science*, July 1, 2014.

³⁰ For more detailed discussions of these conclusions, see Scott Barry Kaufman, *The Complexity of Greatness: Beyond Talent or Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2013); David S. Moore, *The Dependent Gene: The Fallacy of “Nature V.s. Nurture”*

still framed dichotomously and take for granted the existence of fixed, objectively definable traits or qualities such as musical potential, aptitude, talent, and even an agreed-upon conception of musical expertise.³¹ Even though debates about the proportionality of genetics and heredity persist, then, the larger critique put forward in this dissertation concerns the enduring, underlying assumption that there is such a thing as “potential” or “giftedness” to detect. As educational psychologist Kurt Heller lamented about this process of detection, not questioning the idea of a “gift” as something an individual possesses, “giftedness research cannot make an absolutely clear distinction between a highly gifted person and a well-trained person, or between an average gifted person and a highly gifted person not taking full advantage of his/her gift.”³²

In the realm of music studies, the majority of scholarship that engages with the ideas of natural ability or innate potential also does so rather uncritically. This literature often tacitly indicates that talent is responsible for a musician’s later success or asserts that a particular figure’s musical talent justifies further study or recognition.³³ Indeed, aside from discussions of the historical origins of the related concept of genius, or brief mentions of musical talent in historical narratives or ethnomusicological investigations, talent has not been generally analyzed and scrutinized as a concept within musicological scholarship. To be sure, some ethnomusicological studies situated outside of European and American cultural contexts have questioned the idea of natural talent as a universally present, scientifically detectable phenomenon. As early as 1964, Alan Merriam observed

(Macmillan, 2003); Angela L. Duckworth Scott Barry Kaufman, “World-Class Expertise: A Developmental Model,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, 2015.

³¹ A small number of recent studies have contributed more educationally engaged perspectives regarding the factors that contribute to exceptional achievement. Two of the most prominent examples are: Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Random House Publishing Group, 2006); Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (Simon and Schuster, 2016).

³² Kurt Heller, *The International Handbook of Giftedness and Talent*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Elsevier, 2000).

³³ Karl Geiringer’s description of Brahms can serve as a first, conspicuous example: “From his father he inherited three characteristics: splendid health, [...], a determination to rise in the world, and his musical talent.” Karl Geiringer, *Brahms: His Life and Work* (Da Capo Press, 2009). For a more recent example from Brahms scholarship, Styra Avans similarly cites talent in the story of the composer’s early success: “Brahms showed exceptional talent, but by the time he was 7 he asked to play the piano. [...] Cossel taught him to the end of his eleventh year, [...] nurturing his talent.” Johannes Brahms and Styra Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

that the concept of musical talent “might be approached by the outsider through the application of tests of music ability, but unfortunately such tests seem clearly to be culture-bound, designed for music as it is known in the Western world and thus of definitely limited value.”³⁴ A few years later, John Blacking explained that the Venda, who would likely be deemed “tone deaf musical moron[s]” on Seashore’s aptitude test, do not carry beliefs about inborn or naturally disparate senses of musicality.³⁵ Indeed, further examples of ethnomusicological counters to the Western construction of natural talent abound: Timothy Rice describes conceptions of virtuosity in Bulgarian instrumentalists divided only along gender lines; Anthony Seeger explains that among the Suyá of the Amazon all children are equally expected to develop musical skills; and Kofi Agawu notes that Northern Ewe communities conceptualize the acquisition of linguistic and musical ability along similar lines.³⁶

In American contexts, only a few studies have started to analyze the “culture-bound” concept of innate talent with any depth. More often, talent is mentioned in passing (most often in ethnomusicological literature) as an example of a particularly culturally ingrained musical phenomenon that Western scholars should be wary of taking for granted in other musical contexts. In summarizing ethnomusicological studies like those listed above, Rice offers this sentence in *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction* to demonstrate the cultural-relativist approach of ethnomusicological scholarship: “Rather than attributing a musician’s skill to some inborn quality or supernatural gift like talent or genius, ethnomusicologists try to explain the social and cultural environment in which such skill and talent is developed and supported.”³⁷ Similarly, Bruno Nettl

³⁴ Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Northwestern University Press, 1964).

³⁵ John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (University of Washington Press, 1973).

³⁶ Timothy Rice, *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music* (University of Chicago Press, 1994); Anthony Seeger, *Why Suyá Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People* (University of Illinois Press, 2004); Victor Kofi Agawu, *African Rhythm Hardback with Accompanying CD: A Northern Ewe Perspective* (CUP Archive, 1995).

³⁷ Timothy Rice, *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

briefly acknowledges the situated nature of a concept like talent in his classic ethnomusicological survey: “In Western culture, we have the concept of musicality and talent not shared by all, but in other cultures this notion may have different implications. Whether some individuals are more musical than others, having a sense of rhythm, or absolute pitch, or an excellent memory, that’s a culture-specific matter.”³⁸

Almost all of these brief ethnomusicological mentions of Euro-American understandings of talent cite the one full volume on the topic, Henry Kingsbury’s 1988 *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System*. In this monograph, Kingsbury turned an anthropological eye toward the Western classical music culture in which he was raised and socialized—a methodological precursor to later such investigations like Nettl’s *Heartland Excursions* or Stephen Cottrell’s *Professional Music Making in London*.³⁹ In a chapter examining how students are evaluated at “Eastern Metropolitan Conservatory,” Kingsbury characterizes talent as a specifically Western construction justifying exceptional musical ability:

The notion of “talent” is so fundamental to Western thinking about human musicality that it perhaps still needs to be emphasized that differentials in musical or esthetic talent are not to be found everywhere. Various anthropologists have noted the lack of such a concept where social and esthetic values are markedly different from those of Western society, along with a corresponding lack of significant differentiation of musical ability among the people.⁴⁰

In addition to identifying talent as a culturally specific concept, Kingsbury showed how it serves as a means of perpetuating power structures and a fixed set of musical priorities within the conservatory community he investigated. Rather than arguing that talent materializes as some sort of natural,

³⁸ Neither Rice nor Nettl discounts the possibility that within those groups, supernatural or inheritance-based models might exist. Theirs, then, are decidedly etic attempts to come to terms with emic conceptions. Here, rather, I aim to interrogate these emic conceptions more closely and critically to understand the ways they operate.

Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts* (University of Illinois Press, 2005).

³⁹ Kingsbury, *Music Talent & Performance*. Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (University of Illinois Press, 1995); Stephen Cottrell, *Professional Music-Making in London: Ethnography and Experience* (Ashgate, 2004).

⁴⁰ Kingsbury, 60.

individual characteristic, he demonstrated how talent emerges through interpersonal interactions, as a socially constructed and ever-shifting aspect of a musician's identity.

Although talent per se has remained under-investigated in music studies, the idea of musical genius has received increasing attention in recent years. While the concepts of genius and talent are sometimes treated as synonymous and at other times as mutually exclusive (an issue addressed more extensively in Chapter 1), in this dissertation I concentrate on and refer to discourses of musical “talent” rather than “genius” to highlight the inclusiveness and relativity of the former concept.⁴¹ To frame this distinction in grammatical terms, the quality of being talented is generally understood as a scalable or gradable adjective—a musician can be declared untalented, or more talented, or exceptionally talented—whereas the idea of the noun genius is largely non-scaling. One cannot be a partial genius, or an extreme genius, but rather is or is not a genius, similarly to the states of being perfect, or true, or square. Historically, genius has been reserved for the small percentage of population at the rightmost end of a bell curve charting human aptitude—or, more often, applied to those regarded as so exceptional that they elude measurement.⁴² In contrast, the question of talent is relevant across the full spectrum of human abilities. It is evaluated in schools, measured by psychologists, and contemplated by any number of aspiring professional or amateur musicians.

Two books in particular have interrogated conceptions of genius: Tia DeNora's *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius* and Peter Kivy's *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius*. While both of these texts explore changing perceptions of genius at various stages in the history of Western classical music, they ultimately reach different conclusions about the concept of genius itself. In a sociological examination of the forces that allowed for Beethoven's remarkable ascent to musical celebrity, DeNora argues that the composer's genius should be

⁴¹ I write about the complex relationship between talent and genius further in Chapter 1.

⁴² Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (Simon and Schuster, 2010).

examined as a historically situated phenomenon, refuting the outlook that any composer's possession of genius can or should be recognized by onlookers anywhere as "a transcendent and immutable form of artistic truth."⁴³ Kivy presents two main conceptions of musical genius—the Longinian, divinely possessed genius and the Platonic, natural, childlike genius—which he argues have alternated in dominance throughout Western musical history. Kivy dedicates an entire section of his book to refuting DeNora's claims that Beethoven's "genius" should be attributed in large part to a social environment primed to appreciate his idiosyncratic set of contributions, revealing that his own belief in the existence of innate geniuses (which he describes in the end of his book as "a mystery marked by myth and metaphor") is anything but historically detached.⁴⁴ In a section on J.S. Bach, for instance, Kivy mentions in a side comment that the composer was "arguably the greatest pure musical genius in our history."

Neither Kivy nor DeNora contribute to our understanding of the conceptual differences between the category of canonized, established genius and the many diverse paths individuals take to being recognized as such, or of how their social identities and abilities may be affected in the process. Throughout her examination of the social forces that allowed for Beethoven's musical contributions to be so enthusiastically received, DeNora employs the terms "talent" and "genius" interchangeably, or at least without providing any terminological differentiation regarding the historical discourses surrounding the composer. Kivy, too, offers intriguing but problematic commentaries on musical potential. Criticizing DeNora's supposed debunking of Beethoven's natural genius, he writes, "As any music teacher knows, musical competence cannot be imparted to all his students, let *alone* musical genius, no matter how much they practice. Some of his students are

⁴³ Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1803* (University of California Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ Peter Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius* (Yale University Press, 2001).

just ‘gifted’—*that* is just ‘common sense.’”⁴⁵ I will not further inspect Kivy’s unironic appeal to common sense here, as I have already discussed how Gramsci and others have described the hegemonic function of “common sense” in discourse-analytical contexts.

Finally, educational discourses—as disciplinarily and methodologically diverse as they are—have provided some helpful perspectives on talent, though few studies have focused in particular on cultural and historical constructions of musical talent. In general, however, the few studies that have begun to question the ideological and practical implications of concepts like talent and giftedness have emerged from the educational realm. In 1997, James Borland boldly asserted that “giftedness is not a fact of nature or something discovered by educators and psychologists but rather a recently invented, socially constructed concept.”⁴⁶ Illustrative subsequent interrogations of these discourses include Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson's assertion that talent is a culturally relative concept rather than a stable trait; Robert Sternberg, Linda Jarvin, and Elena Grigorenko’s comprehensive interrogation of understandings and differing definitions of giftedness; and Stark's contention that contemporary ability discourse developed from segregationist educational practices.⁴⁷ Education researchers have also started to investigate how ideologies of musical talent operate on the ground. Hallam and Prince surveyed a range of musicians, educators, students, and non-musicians about their perceptions of musical ability to work toward a classification of cultural constructions of musical ability.⁴⁸ An article by Lawrence Scripp et al. even took the politicized stance that “music education policy stakeholders need to support innovative teaching practices that are free of lingering explicit, implicit, or unconscious assumptions of ‘innate talent’ in order to craft

⁴⁵ Kivy, 253.

⁴⁶ Borland, “The Construct of Giftedness,” 6.

⁴⁷ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson, “Culture, Time, and the Development of Talent,” in *The Systems Model of Creativity* (Springer Netherlands, 2014), 27–46; Robert J. Sternberg, Linda Jarvin, and Elena L. Grigorenko, *Explorations in Giftedness* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Lauren Stark, “Naming Giftedness: Whiteness and Ability Discourse in US Schools,” *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 24, no. 4 (December 2014): 394.

⁴⁸ Susan Hallam and Vanessa Prince, “Conceptions of Musical Ability,” *Research Studies in Music Education* 20, no. 1 (June 1, 2003): 2–22.

and implement public education policies that will lead to early, ongoing, and equitable access to an intensive study of music.”⁴⁹ Still, few educational studies have investigated the underlying discourses that contribute to enduring beliefs in innate musical aptitudes. Patricia Campbell, who has identified her scholarship as occupying “the cracks between education and musicology,” summed up the general argument of this small cohort of education scholars calling for increased interrogation of the ways ideologies of musical talent operate: “Of all the phrases that have gelled into a kind of common usage, few have been as devastating to children’s development as that of ‘talent.’ This Eurocentric concept of musical talent [...] creates images of musical participation for the very few.”⁵⁰

Chapter Summaries

The dissertation comprises four chapters that analyze discursive struggles over musical talent from different vantage points, traversing a range of historical and contextual terrain.⁵¹ I focus on discourses from around the start of the nineteenth century until the present day. In Chapter 1, “Defining Talent,” I bring previously disparate musicological, critical, scientific, and educational scholarship into conversation in order to parse the multiple meanings musical talent has accrued. The chapter begins with a discussion of two dominant conceptions of talent (“Jeffersonian” and “Galtonian”) that continually surfaced in my research and influentially portrayed talent as an innate possession. The remainder of the chapter presents a typology that combines my case study data with additional historical and critical research. I posit five core meanings of talent that have circulated in

⁴⁹ Lawrence Scripp, Devin Ulibarri, and Robert Flax, “Thinking Beyond the Myths and Misconceptions of Talent: Creating Music Education Policy That Advances Music’s Essential Contribution to Twenty-First-Century Teaching and Learning,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 114, no. 2 (January 1, 2013): 54–102.

⁵⁰ Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Songs in Their Heads: Music and Its Meaning in Children’s Lives, Second Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵¹ While I maintain that composition and performance are not separate activities, but exist on a complex spectrum along with improvisation, movement, and any number of other musicking activities, the dissertation’s discussion focuses on discourses about performers, or “musicians.”

American musical discourses: talent as gift, as inheritance, as potentiality, as passion, and as speed. In all, the chapter offers a heuristic for the complex concept at the heart of the dissertation as well as a theoretical apparatus for subsequent scholarly work that engages with the concept of talent.

In Chapter 2, “Explaining Talent,” I examine popular nineteenth-century discourses of musicality through the lens of a blind African American composer and pianist named Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins (1849–1908). The voices of critics, scholars, and other contemporaries of Wiggins serve as the chapter’s central data. My analysis centers on five main tensions at the heart of the diverse and copious discourses about Blind Tom—namely, whether talent was a discovery or an invention; whether it was a gift or a commodity; whether it was evidence of a prodigy or a childlike display; whether it was located in the body or the soul; and whether it was true magic or merely an illusion. I contend that reactions to Blind Tom’s performances not only revealed racialized tensions at the heart of broader constructions of talent; his performances also challenged these constructions, exposing chinks in the ideological armor that served to fortify the color line in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

In Chapter 3, “Representing Talent,” I consider the portrayal of musical talent on three twenty-first century reality television programs: *American Idol* (*AI*, 2002–2016, 2018–), *America’s Got Talent* (*AGT*, 2006–), and *The Voice* (2011–). I argue that these programs forward a Jeffersonian conception of musicality, which portrays talent as something randomly scattered across the American population regardless of one’s race, gender, class, or region of origin. I begin with a history of American talent competition programs, considering how discourses of musical talent influenced and were influenced by this entertainment genre. The remainder of the chapter explores three discursive mechanisms these programs employ to support this Jeffersonian conception of talent and perpetuate myths of meritocracy. These mechanisms include constructing a category of “anti-talented” contestants that pose “talented” contestants to be a self-evident, non-scaling

category; representing adverse experiences (disability, illness, trauma) as a necessary condition for exceptional musical ability; and portraying judges' affective and emotional responses to contestants' performances as the most authentic evidence of talent's presence.

Chapter 4, "Teaching Talent," draws upon six years of ethnographic fieldwork with music educators, parents, and students from string education communities across the country. I demonstrate how two popular teaching methods—developed by Shinichi Suzuki and Mark O'Connor, respectively—perpetuate ideologies of talent that lead to highly divergent student learning outcomes. Where Suzuki argued that "talent is no accident of birth" and that *all* children are capable of being shaped into talented learners through his method, O'Connor celebrates a conception of talent closer to the Jeffersonian paradigm described above. I focus in particular on case studies of two master teachers who enact their respective methods' ideologies in their day-to-day teaching, concluding the chapter with a detailed analysis of one private violin lesson taught by each teacher. I contend that Suzuki's conception of talent allows students with a requisite amount of financial and cultural capital to become exceptional classical violinists, providing students equality of achievement. Conversely, the O'Connor method's belief in students' individual types and degrees of talent allows a much wider range of students to learn the instrument, providing equality of access, but does not ensure that students will achieve any particular level of proficiency.

While these four chapters cover seemingly disparate historical and discursive terrain, the project is united by a number of recurring threads. Indeed, the richness of this connective thematic tissue supports my central argument that constructions of talent are not neatly contained within the terminologies of popular, pedagogical, scientific, or critical discourses, but circulate within and between these discourses in ways that call for further examination. The meanings of talent outlined in Chapter 1 surface consistently in the discursive struggles each case study examines. Further, paradigms of Western art music culture continually enter into conflict with hierarchies of value

supported by other musical genres and communities. The recurring archetype of Beethovenian genius serves as one example. While Blind Tom was characterized as “the soul of Beethoven in the body of an idiot,” the young contestant described in the opening of Chapter 3 was dubbed “Beethoven” by the judges, and the Beethoven violin concerto arose repeatedly as an emblem of achievement in conversations with my interlocutors in Chapter 4; Beethoven’s presence loomed even in the “Ode to Joy” excerpt featured in the dissertation’s opening vignette. Ultimately, “Discourses of Musical Talent in American Culture” demonstrates that musical talent is never simply “talent as such.”⁵² Rather, it is a signifier frequently used to obscure and perpetuate differential access to power and privilege. The project encourages scholars and teachers of music to consider the social and cultural biases that inform declarations of talent and projections of possibility in both scholarly and pedagogical contexts.

⁵² Slavoj Žižek, *Mapping Ideology* (Verso Books, 2012), 12.

I. Defining Talent: A Typology of Meanings

Introduction

The concept of talent pervades American musical discourses. It is presented as evidence in reviews of musical performances.¹ It is cited by decision-makers in formal and informal educational gatekeeping systems, from children's first musical experiences until their conservatory juries.² It is invoked to explain musicians' and composers' successes in historical and biographical writing.³ It guides the decisions of parents.⁴ It permeates self-help literature.⁵ It provides fodder for numerous branches of the entertainment industry.⁶ It becomes internalized and performed as an aspect of individuals' identities.⁷ It suffuses academic scholarship both as a term and a topic of inquiry.⁸ It surfaces frequently in the talk and text of everyday life.⁹ Indeed, whoever is reading these words has likely been affected by some combination of these discourses.

In a nation fueled by systems that purport to rate, rank, and reward “exceptional” performance, the concept of talent serves as crucial currency. When faced with overflowing pools of

¹ See, for example, “What should have sold Tuesday's audience on supporting the New York City Opera was not the overheated hype, visual aids and self-congratulation, but the quality of young talent that paraded across the stage. All these voices radiated health and promise.” Bernard Holland, “Music Review; A Parade of Young Talent Brightens a Gala,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2006, sec. Arts.

² As one interlocutor for a study on conservatory gatekeeping remarked, “Very often, I see a less talented singer getting work and having a career over a singer with more talent simply because they were more persistent. It's inspiring, actually.” Linda Jarvin and Rena F. Subotnik, “Wisdom from Conservatory Faculty: Insights on Success in Classical Music Performance,” *Roeper Review* 32, no. 2 (March 25, 2010): 78–87.

³ “Dvorak's talent was apparent from the beginning, and he started taking serious lessons at the age of twelve.” Harold C. Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 383.

⁴ “1. Know and understand your own talents and know how you can best apply them with your children and family. 2. Discover your children's talents and help them develop their talents into strengths.” Mary Reckmeyer, *Strengths Based Parenting: Developing Your Children's Innate Talents* (Gallup Press, 2016), 86.

⁵ Robert A. Cutietta, *Raising Musical Kids: A Guide for Parents* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Shaidornell Swer, *How You Can Discover Your Talent and Transform Your Life: The First and Only Book of Its Kind in World Literary History!* (Notion Press, 2018).

⁶ Jean K. Chalaby, *The Format Age: Television's Entertainment Revolution* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

⁷ Eve Ruddock and Samuel Leong, “‘I Am Unmusical!': The Verdict of Self-Judgement,” *International Journal of Music Education* 23, no. 1 (April 1, 2005): 9–22.

⁸ For a sampling of the ways these various discourses engage with the concept of talent, see this chapter's bibliography.

⁹ “Word Frequency: Based on 450 Million Word COCA Corpus,” accessed June 9, 2018, <https://www.wordfrequency.info/free.asp?s=y>.

applicants, those managing the resources of educational, commercial, and cultural institutions are doubly driven to identify those with the most “talent” or “potential”—not only to embody ethical and equitable values, but to survive in competitive national and international marketplaces. Without concepts like giftedness, potential, talent, and the complementary ideology of meritocracy that mobilizes them, how would educational opportunities be apportioned, scholarships bestowed, awards allocated? As this chapter details, notions of natural superiority and innate potential are woven into the very conceptual and linguistic fabric of American culture. In everyday speech, Americans identify diamonds in the rough; they separate the wheat from the chaff; they allow the cream to rise to the top; they wait for talent to out, like a truth waiting to be revealed.¹⁰

The fundamental problem, however, is that as a signifier, talent floats.¹¹ Despite (or because of) the term’s ubiquity in the past two centuries, it has been used to describe to a veritable potpourri of musical skills, sounds, states, traits, life stages, and origin stories. Thus, depending on one’s theoretical proclivities, talent might be framed and analyzed as an empty signifier or as a master signifier.¹² It might be attributed to a baby intrigued by the sounds of a piano, the winner of an international piano competition, a third grader performing karaoke in a school talent show, a self-taught street musician, a retiree picking up a guitar for the first time. Though talent’s contemporary meanings gesture toward something universally desirable, few agree on its exact meaning. Rather than rendering the concept of musical talent trivial or meaningless, however, this ambiguity grants it

¹⁰ “Talent will out” is an idiom that has arisen in my fieldwork and elsewhere; it summons a quotation from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, “truth will come to light murder cannot be hid long; a man’s son may, but at the length truth will out.” William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Penguin Books, 1959), 51.

¹¹ I discussed talent as a floating (or empty) signifier in the introduction, but it is important to clarify how I intend this term, as the concept of a floating signifier is so common in academic discourse that it runs the risk of being misinterpreted—ironically, becoming a type of floating signifier itself. While I ascribe to the general poststructuralist understanding that for all signs there is “incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier,” as Lacan put it, I treat empty signifiers as particularly powerful signs of an absence, as constituting an ambiguity that is contingent upon the context of a struggle for power. As Laclau succinctly remarked, “The presence of empty signifiers—in the sense that we have defined them—is the very condition of hegemony.” Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(S)* (Verso Books, 1996), 43.

¹² For a helpful discussion of the relationship between these different types of signifiers, see Seth Brodsky, *From 1989, Or European Music and the Modernist Unconscious* (University of California Press, 2017), 77.

power—as Ernesto Laclau has argued, its emptiness as a signifier, its lack of specificity and positive meaning, allows it to be coopted by ever-shifting hegemonic forces.¹³ Therefore, the ability to determine what talent means—and especially who gets to be called talented—is an opportunity that reflects and grants social power, rendering the concept a consequential and highly contested site of discursive struggle.

In this chapter, I analyze the *terms* of this struggle: the separate and sometimes mutually exclusive meanings the concept of musical talent has accrued in its circulation within and between American discourses, whether psychological, musicological, educational, political, popular-cultural, or subcultural. By employing “meanings” in the title, do not intend to suggest that this chapter is simply akin to an extended explication or encyclopedia entry; rather, I hope to summon the idea of meaning-making, which in the context of educational psychology refers to the ways individuals make sense of the world and their own identities as they traverse various (often conflicting) discourses.¹⁴ Each “meaning” that follows, then, not only presents distinct denotative information, but more complex, connotative, explanatory details.¹⁵ James Gillies, Robert A. Neimeyer, and Evgenia Milman helpfully explain this process of meaning-making as “retaining, reaffirming, revising, or replacing elements of their orienting system to develop more nuanced, complex and useful systems.”¹⁶

Toward this end, I present a typology of five core meanings that generally emerge from discourses of musical talent. While this typology focuses on the past two centuries, its historical

¹³ Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (Verso Books, 1977).

¹⁴ Steven Pearlman, “Meaning Making and Making Meaning Meaningful: The Relationship Between Language and Thought in Critical Pedagogy,” *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 5, no. 2 (October 13, 2014).

¹⁵ James Gee, discussed in the introduction, considered meaning-making through a musical analogy. While his explanation of meaning-making is helpful, his oversimplification of the process of music-making is further testament to the necessity of complicating understandings of musicality: “It is pretty clear what it means to make music. However, we use language to make meaning and it is not clear what that ‘making meaning’ means. In the broadest sense, we make meaning by using language to say things that, in actual contexts of use, amount, too, to doing things and being things. These things we do and are (identities) thereby come to exist in the world and, in turn, they bring about other things in the world.” Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*.

¹⁶ James Gillies, Robert A. Neimeyer, and Evgenia Milman, “The Meaning of Loss Codebook: Construction of a System for Analyzing Meanings Made in Bereavement,” *Death Studies* 38, no. 4 (April 21, 2014): 208.

reach extends to examine formative genealogical and etymological moments as well. In devising this typology, I have drawn upon historical and critical research as well as the discourses examined in more detail in the dissertation's three case studies. Importantly, these meanings are not uniform in their construction or their relationship to one another; some operate metaphorically while others are articulated in relation to another specific concept. Moreover, some meanings are culturally dominant—such as those that have been consolidated into dictionary definitions—and others are more historically or contextually bounded, ranging from the deliberately subversive to the disciplinarily specific.

While my typology is designed to act as a heuristic that illuminates differing conceptions of *musical* talent, the ensuing pages address broader constructions such as giftedness, potentiality, and genius as well. As I wrote in the introduction, musical talent both represents and directly influences broader ideologies about talent, individual difference, and ability development. Musical ability, however defined, requires a vast range of neurological processes, pedagogical approaches, and learning experiences; sometimes it closely resembles athletic expertise development, sometimes intellectual growth, and sometimes it resembles and requires the cultivation of particular social and emotional skills.¹⁷

Musicality is also a notoriously powerful signifier of cultural, ethnic, and racial identity more broadly; one's perceived level of musical talent can do powerful representational work within American cultural contexts.¹⁸ To offer just one example, African American racial uplift strategies from the nineteenth century to the present day have employed and strategically manipulated mainstream Eurocentric understandings about musical talent. James Monroe Trotter, one of the first

¹⁷ For a more extensive explanation of the ways social and emotional skills are addressed especially in arts educational contexts, see Shewfelt et al., "Arts Education and Socio-Emotional Learning Outcomes among K-12 Students: Developing a Theory of Action."

¹⁸ I use "musicality" throughout this dissertation as a general synonym for musical talent (and therefore just as much of a floating signifier).

major proponents of music-oriented racial uplift in the nineteenth century (discussed in the following chapter), strongly advocated music's—and musicality's—signifying powers. As Lawrence Schenbeck has written, Trotter argued that “since music was indeed among the most elevated of the arts, pursuit and perception of which marked one off as intelligent, capable, and socially evolved, there should be no denying the linkage between such accomplishment and the portraits of accomplished blacks to follow.”¹⁹ Regardless of whether the following types focus on instances of talent more broadly or on musical talent more specifically, each seemingly isolated event has broader implications.

This chapter serves two chief purposes. First, it contextualizes and analyzes the complex concept at the heart of the dissertation, offering examples from the subsequent chapters to demonstrate how these ten meaning types circulate among all three case studies, using their triangulation to understand a much broader American discursive terrain. Second, it aims to provide a conceptual apparatus for subsequent scholarly work dealing with topics where questions about ability development, individual differences, and musical exceptionalism arise. In presenting this typology, I hope to encourage scholars to attend to the power dynamics and regimes of value embedded in declarations of musical talent, rather than uncritically reifying the concept as an innate, stable, and universally recognizable property.²⁰

Before addressing the five meanings' differing levels and locations of influence, it is important first to situate my typology within the broader American discursive landscape. In the following section, therefore, I examine two historically influential ideologies of talent that have remained dominant in contemporary discourses. Across the typology, these conceptions of talent

¹⁹ Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943* (University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 53.

²⁰ Fred R. Myers, *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (School of American Research Press, 2001).

reverberate as authoritative; other meanings cannot stand on their own, but are forced to challenge, elaborate upon, or manipulate them.

Talent as Innateness: Two Dominant Conceptions

At the start of their genealogy of hegemony in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe caution themselves, and perhaps also their readers, to “avoid any temptation to go back to the ‘origins.’ Let us simply pierce a moment in time and try to detect the presence of that void which the logic of hegemony will attempt to fill.”²¹ Following this cue, let us pierce a moment in time to perform a similar operation on the hegemonic logic of musical talent. That moment is sometime around 1781, when Thomas Jefferson completed the first version of *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In the midst of a discussion about the American educational system, which he contends should “diffuse knowledge more generally through the mass of the people,” Jefferson declares, “we hope to avail the state of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use, if not sought for and cultivated.”²² This explanation encapsulates what I argue is the most prevalent understanding of talent in American discourse, and the implicit and explicit premise of many educational discourses examined in the following chapters. Throughout the project, I refer to this understanding as the “Jeffersonian” conception of talent.

Far from being confined to its time, descriptions like Jefferson’s continued to find expression more than two centuries later. In 1993, for instance, the U.S. Department of Education released a report entitled *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent*. The report identifies an American educational dilemma, a “silent crisis” of national underachievement on the international stage, not all that different from the one Jefferson diagnosed: a lack of services that

²¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards A Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso Books, 2014), 8.

²² Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (J. Stockdale, 1787), 220.

permit the most “gifted” children to reach their full “potential.”²³ The report states, “Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment.”²⁴ The authors continue on to explain that these children “require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural backgrounds, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor.”²⁵ As these two highly visible national documents together evince, certain essential tenets of talent have endured across this vast expanse of time—the approximate timespan this dissertation investigates.²⁶

According to the Jeffersonian conception, talent is possessed by some finite number of young people across the United States, regardless of their social statuses—and, as the more modernized *National Excellence* report adds, regardless of race, culture, and disciplinary pursuit, as well.²⁷ This conception poses talent as “natural,” and importantly, not as hereditary. Rather than being inherent to an aristocratic system based on familial status or lineage, the reasoning goes, talent participates in a more ethical (and more fruitful) meritocratic one. Jefferson elaborated upon this understanding in writings throughout his life. Perhaps the most emblematic explanation appeared in a 1781 letter to John Adams. As he explained, “there is a natural aristocracy among men. The

²³ Crucially, rather than arguing that all children should be served in order to allow their talents to emerge, the *National Excellence* document argues that talented children should receive a disproportionate amount of educational resources. This development still rests, however, on the broader Jeffersonian assumption that stochastic talent may emerge in any number of students and that socioeconomic class or heredity are not the most desirable mechanism for determining which students are granted educational opportunities.

²⁴ Pat O’Connell Ross, “National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent.” (Washington, D.C., 1993).

²⁵ Ross.

²⁶ It should be noted, however, that conceptions of talent have also shifted in meaningful ways since the late eighteenth century. I highlight this enduring thread of meaning here to emphasize how talent’s role in American discourses has somewhat surprisingly weathered these historical sea changes.

²⁷ It is important to note that Jefferson’s in its original form was categorically racist. As Jefferson remarked at a different point in *Notes*, “I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.” Further, Jefferson’s original sentiments behind such “natural” potential have not simply vanished, but have simply been more insidiously incorporated into the color-blind language of documents like the *National Excellence* report. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 155.

grounds of this are virtue and talents.”²⁸ Here, Jefferson’s eighteenth-century understanding of “natural” indicated something exclusive with biological inheritance, something that opposed the more antiquated and unscrupulous “artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents.”²⁹ In contrast, this *natural* aristocracy, “the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society,” had to be sought out—through the systematic excavation of hidden gems of human potential, those untapped resources stochastically sprinkled throughout the American population, waiting to be discovered.³⁰

Jefferson’s concept of a natural aristocracy remains fundamental to American national ideologies—an essential element of the American Dream narrative that paradoxically repeats the Declaration of Independence dictum that everyone is created equal while averring that opportunity for educational and financial prosperity should be disbursed according to each individual’s combination of “innate potential” and hard work.³¹ Today Jefferson’s conception of a “natural aristocracy” has been replaced by the idea of “meritocracy,” a term coined by the British sociologist Michael Young in 1958, who (ironically) intended to highlight the hypocrisy and hegemonic implications of a concept that sought to establish yet another hierarchical, exclusionary class structure.³² Nevertheless, this meritocratic ideal, most generally understood as “the idea that

²⁸ Letter to John Adams, October 28, 1813. Robert M. S. McDonald, “The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Retirement Series,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (June 1, 2013): 190–91. It is important to note that while the ethos of the “American Dream” certainly dates back to Jefferson’s era, the term itself was more recently popularized in Adams’s *The Epic Of America*; the first of the phrase perpetuates a similarly slippery understanding of ability’s relationship to meritocratic values: “But there has been also the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.” James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Transaction Publishers, 2012), 404.

²⁹ McDonald, “The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Retirement Series.”

³⁰ Rose Yont, writing in the first decades of the twentieth century, referenced this Jeffersonian understanding of talent in her writing, to offer one specifically musical connective thread. “In regard to music, our nation is not doing its duty toward the poor. Furthermore, it is unwise to separate men by great barriers, i.e. the rich can afford advantages which the poor cannot hope to obtain without public help, notwithstanding the fact that the poor may possess double the talent.” Rose Yont, *Status and Value of Music in Education* (Woodruff Press, 1916), 468.

³¹ Henry Kingsbury has pointed out this irony at the heart of in spite of the seemingly fervently held ‘truth’ that ‘all men are created equal,’ talent is very much a positive value in present-day Western culture.”

³² Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Transaction Publishers, 2011). For a helpful contextualization of Young’s position, see Khen Lampert, *Meritocratic Education and Social Worthlessness* (Springer, 2012), 52.

whatever your social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for ‘talent’ to combine with ‘effort’ in order to ‘rise to the top,’” relies on this notion of innate, randomly bestowed talent, that “gift of nature” that certain individuals possess.³³ In other words, innate talent and meritocracy are two sides of the coin of America’s signature promise of equal opportunity. And examples of musical talent in particular have provided copious evidence that exceptional ability can indeed emerge from the most inconspicuous or inauspicious corners of the populace—from the rags-to-riches origin stories of countless composers to the ranks of aspiring amateurs auditioning for *American Idol*.

Despite the enduring prevalence of Jeffersonian understandings, a second popular understanding of talent—with largely different implications, though still portraying talent’s innateness as axiomatic—has pervaded American discourses over the last two centuries. Though epistemological debates about innate knowledge (intellectual, creative, or otherwise) stretch back nearly indefinitely, the terms of these discourses became increasingly moored to scientific beliefs in the mid-nineteenth century, in large part because of Charles Darwin’s influential writings on evolution.³⁴ In 1869, the British psychologist and polymath Francis Galton published *Hereditary Genius*, offering a timely new explanation of exceptionalism based on theories of genetic determinism, in which he posited a dichotomy between “nature” and “nurture.”³⁵ Inspired by the work of Darwin, who was his cousin—a fact not forgotten in his analysis of the hereditary nature of scientific eminence—Galton argued that “talent and peculiarities of character are found in the children, when they have existed in either of the parents, to an extent beyond all question greater than in the children of ordinary persons.”³⁶

³³ Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (Routledge, 2017), 1.

³⁴ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection, Or, the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life* (Appleton, 1859).

³⁵ Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* (Macmillan, 1869).

³⁶ Although Galton discusses talent extensively in *Hereditary Genius*, the work’s title summons connections with the concept of “genius,” as well. Galton’s eponymous use of the word, however, was not intended to speak directly to this

The scientific methods Galton employed in *Hereditary Genius* were just as deeply linked to his assertions about talent.³⁷ While Enlightenment-influenced conceptions like Jefferson’s foregrounding paradigms of nature and “the natural” were still prominent during this era (as the following chapter will illustrate) the work of Galton and his contemporaries posited “the normal” as a new hierarchical classificatory system. The type of statistical pedigree analysis that Galton conducted was facilitated by the earlier work of German mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss, who argued that physical properties were distributed “normally” within certain limits.³⁸ This concept of the average, or the normal, served as a foundational framework for Galton’s understanding of talent, which he represented as objectively measurable and predictably distributed as any other inherited trait; the example he used was human height. To measure for this distribution of talent, Galton conducted extensive research into the “eminence” of figures in a number of disciplinary areas ranging from “literary men” and “men of science” to “poets” and “musicians.”³⁹ Although Galton had particular trouble finding consistent data regarding the most eminent (in this context, unanimously esteemed) musicians, he maintained that his understanding of the hereditary nature of talent applied to musical cases, posing this conclusion as a matter of common sense: “the fact of the

philosophically loaded understanding. As he noted, “The fault in the volume that I chiefly regret is the choice of its title of *Hereditary Genius*, but it cannot be remedied now. There was not the slightest intention on my part to use the word genius in any technical sense, but merely as expressing an ability that was exceptionally high, and at the same time inborn. It was intended to be used in the senses ascribed to the word in Johnson’s Dictionary, viz. ‘Mental power or faculties. Disposition of nature by which any one is qualified to some peculiar employment.’” Galton, viii.

³⁷ Fairclough noted that discourse “shapes and is shaped by” the ideologies of individuals who engage it; similarly, Galton’s methodological approach is implicated in a similar relationship with his conclusions about what abilities are “normal.”

³⁸ Harry Bruinius, *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America’s Quest for Racial Purity* (Vintage Books, 2007), 93. Bruinius continues, “According to the law [of error], most measurements would cluster around the ‘mean,’ like iron flakes to a magnet, but there would also be a regular, descending number of deviations on either side. Though Galton explained this law by showing the distribution of adult male height on a straight bar graph—a strip of paper punched with holes—when it was later displayed on a graph with two axes, this ‘law of error’ formed a neat and useful ‘bell curve.’”

³⁹ The issue of Jefferson’s and Galton’s gendered language in these examples (as well as the place of evolving constructions of gender in relation to musicality more broadly) merits further consideration than space allows in this project. I will merely point out that during Jefferson’s and Galton’s lifetimes, the concept of talent was gendered as systematically as it was raced, the latter of which is explored further in Chapter 2. For instance, what contemporary parents or educators might identify as signifiers of musical “potential” were not understood as such in domestic, avocational, and typically feminized music-making contexts.

inheritance of musical taste is notorious and undeniable.”⁴⁰ In short, Francis Galton’s understanding of talent in *Hereditary Genius* marks another moment—not wholly originary, but highly influential—that encapsulates a second dominant logic about the meaning of talent. Namely, abilities may vary somewhat within familial lines due to education and other factors, but exceptional musical “gifts” are not randomly bestowed by nature; they are inherited. I refer to this conception in the dissertation as the “Galtonian” conception of talent.

As the analysis in the ensuing typology illustrates in further detail, the implications of these Jeffersonian and Galtonian understandings vary drastically: one perpetuated the obfuscation of systemic inequalities in American educational contexts for centuries; the other led directly to the eugenics movement and, indirectly, insidious appeals to nature and heredity after the decline of eugenics proper. These two conceptions are united, however, in their unwavering affirmation of talent’s innateness and so-called naturalness, pointing to its most dominant meaning as a signifier.⁴¹ Neither Jefferson nor Galton supported the argument that any child might be taught to play and create music at a high level, however defined—that “talent is no accident of birth,” as Shinichi Suzuki has asserted.⁴² Both Jefferson and Galton’s logics operated upon the axiom that talent was always already inside of certain individuals.

Both Jeffersonian and Galtonian understandings of talent as innate hover in the background of American discourses, and in various dictionaries’ attempts to summarize most prevalent meanings

⁴⁰ Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, 239.

⁴¹ Regarding the Jeffersonian conception, by seeming to see talent as widely dispersed Jefferson made it possible to serve the talented without appearing to serve only a privileged class. Regarding nature, among others, Lorraine Daston has discussed how such appeals to nature are also fraught with ambiguity. In her discussion of the idea of the “naturalistic fallacy,” for instance, she notes, “a kind of covert smuggling operation in which cultural values are transferred to nature and nature’s authority is then called upon to buttress those very same values. This sort of value trafficking can be politically consequential.” Lorraine Daston, “The Naturalistic Fallacy Is Modern,” *Isis* 105, no. 3 (September 1, 2014): 579–87.

⁴² As I will discuss, this more cultivation-affirming meaning also circulated in educational and philosophical discourses from Jefferson’s era until the twenty-first century. Shinichi Suzuki and Waltraud Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love: The Classic Approach to Talent Education* (Alfred Music, 1983), 1.

(which variously characterize talent as a “natural gift,” “endowment,” “aptitude,” “faculty,” or “innate” quality).⁴³ The following collection of dictionary definitions (Table 1.1) illustrates how summaries of talent’s common usages have shifted only somewhat over the course of nearly two centuries.⁴⁴ It is important to note how emphases on the etymological roots of “talent,” the gold currency at the heart of the famous Biblical parable analyzed further in the following section, become increasingly superseded by the figurative understanding of talent as an “aptitude,” a “natural gift,” or simply a particular skill or ability.⁴⁵ As historically situated attempts to condense shared understandings of talent, these dictionary definitions will serve as helpful references for the types of meanings outlined in the following section. I have intentionally included a variety of dictionary types—older and newer, American and British, brief and more thorough—to illustrate the variety of ways the word has been defined, summarized, synonymized, and divided into separate meanings. It should be said, of course, that dictionary definitions are not authoritative or even necessarily accurate representations of a word’s most common meaning or usage at any given time or across discursive contexts.⁴⁶ Indeed, the following definitions provide little clarity: in the table, there are references to every one of the ten different and often-opposing types of meanings the typology will address. Whereas earlier definitions used artistic pursuits in sentence examples illustrating the words

⁴³ Interestingly, none of these definitions relate such innateness explicitly to Jeffersonian or Galtonian understandings, though a few of the definitions acknowledge the debate over talent’s origins as “natural or acquired,” “innate or developed.” Robert Hunter, *Universal Dictionary of the English Language: A New and Original Work Presenting for Convenient Reference the Orthography, Pronunciation, Meaning, Use, Origin and Development of Every Word in the English Language Together with Condensed Explanations of Fifty Thousand Important Subjects and an Exhaustive Encyclopaedia of All the Arts and Sciences Profusely Illustrated* (P. F. Collier, 1899); Philip Babcock Gove, *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language: Unabridged. A Merriam-Webster. Utilizing All the Experience and Resources of More Than One Hundred Years of Merriam-Webster Dictionaries* (G. & C Merriam Company, 1969).

⁴⁴ The definitions I provide in Table 1.1 are not complete; I have chosen to omit examples, elaborations, and various grammatical notes, focusing instead on the order and specific wording of the definitions.

⁴⁵ It is important to mention that some dictionaries order meanings from most to least common usage, while others (especially older ones) list definitions in historical order, from oldest to newest meaning.

⁴⁶ As Jo Littler quipped at the beginning of her book on meritocracy, “never start with the dictionary,” despite the temptation to treat dictionary definitions as “immutable empirical truths flung from a faceless, ahistorical summit of scientific rationality.” Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, 1.

in use, later definitions specifically address the specialized (and often artistic and musical) associations of the word.

Table 1.1 Changing definitions of talent	
<i>A Dictionary of the English Language</i> , 1828. ⁴⁷	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Among the ancients, a weight, and a coin. The true value of the talent cannot well be ascertained, but it is known that it was different among different nations. 2. <i>Talent</i> among the Hebrews, was also a gold coin. 3. Faculty; natural gift or endowment; a metaphorical application of the word, said to be borrowed from the Scriptural parable of the talents [Matthew 25:14-30]. 4. Eminent abilities; superior genius; as, he is a man of talents. 5. Particular faculty; skill.
<i>Dr. Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language</i> , 1828. ⁴⁸	<p>Talent: A <i>talent</i> signified so much weight, or a sum of money, the value differing according to the different ages and countries.</p> <p>Faculty; power; gift of nature.</p>
<i>A Primary School Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language</i> , 1857. ⁴⁹	<p>Talent. A weight; coin.</p> <p>Talented. Possessing talents or abilities.</p>
<i>Etymological and pronouncing dictionary of the English language</i> , 1881. ⁵⁰	<p>Among the <i>ancients</i>, a weight, a coin, or a sum of money, varying in amount; a metaphorical use from the Scripture parable of the talents, natural gift or endowment; eminent ability; particular faculty: talented, possessing skill or talents; mentally gifted.</p>
<i>Universal Dictionary of the English Language</i> , 1899. ⁵¹	<p>I. Ordinary Language: 1. Lit, in the same sense as II. 2. Figuratively, (1) a gift, endowment, or faculty; some peculiar faculty, ability, power, or accomplishment, natural or acquired (a metaphor borrowed from the parable in St. Matthew). (2) Mental endowments or capacities of a superior kind; general mental power. (Used in either the singular or the plural) (3) Hence, used for talented persons collectively; men of ability or talent; (4) Quality, character, characteristic; (5) Disposition, inclination;</p> <p>II. <i>Greek Antiq.</i>: The name of a weight and denomination of money among the ancient Greeks.</p>

⁴⁷ Noah Webster, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (London: Black, Young, and Young, 1828).

⁴⁸ Samuel Johnson, John Walker, and Robert S. Jameson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (W. Pickering, 1828).

⁴⁹ Noah Webster and William Greenleaf Webster, *A Primary-School Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language* (J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1857).

⁵⁰ James Stormonth, *Etymological and Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language, Including a Very Copious Selection of Scientific Terms for Use in Schools and Colleges and as a Book of General Reference* (Edinburgh, W. Blackwood, 1881).

⁵¹ Hunter, *Universal Dictionary of the English Language*.

Table 1.1 Changing definitions of talent (continued)	
<i>The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English</i> , 1919. ⁵²	Special aptitude, faculty, gift, (for music &c., for doing; see <i>Matt XXV 14-30</i>), high mental ability, whence talented, talentless, aa.; persons of t., as all the t, of the country, looking out for local t.; To bookmakers; ancient weight and money of account among Greek, Romans, Assyrians, &c., of varying value, as Attic t.
<i>Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language</i> (Gove), 1969. ⁵³	1. Any of several ancient units of weight. 2. <i>archaic</i> : a characteristic feature, aptitude, or disposition of a person or animal. 3. The abilities, powers, and gifts bestowed upon a man : natural endowments. 4. a. Special innate or developed aptitude for an expressed or implied activity usually of a creative or artistic nature. b. general intelligence or mental power : ability. 5. a. A person of talent usually in a specific branch of activity. b. One that is talented or skilled in a performing art. Synonyms, see GIFT.
<i>American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language</i> , 2018. ⁵⁴	1. a. A marked innate ability, as for artistic accomplishment: has a rare talent for music. b. Natural endowment or ability of a superior quality: The play has a cast of immense talent. c. A person or group of people having such ability. 2. A variable unit of weight and money used in ancient Greece, Rome, and the Middle East.
<i>Merriam-Webster Dictionary</i> , 2018. ⁵⁵	1. a. A special often athletic, creative, or artistic aptitude b. general intelligence or mental power: ability. 2. The natural endowments of a person. 3. A person of talent or a group of persons of talent in a field. 4a. any of several ancient units of weight. 2b. a unit of value equal to the value of a talent of gold or silver. <i>Archaic</i> : a characteristic feature, aptitude, or disposition of a person or animal.

A Typology

Here I examine the five core meanings of talent that have continued to surface in each case study and in my broader research. In keeping with my larger argument that understandings of talent

⁵² Henry Watson Fowler, Francis George Fowler, and James Augustus Henry Murray, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1919).

⁵³ Gove, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*.

⁵⁴ Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, "Talent," Online Dictionary, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, accessed May 20, 2018, <https://www.ahdictionary.com>.

⁵⁵ "Talent," Online Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/talent>.

never stand on their own but operate as loci of discursive struggle, I present these types agonistically: each *core* meaning I analyze is accompanied by a *contrasting* understanding that resists, complicates, or otherwise challenges it. The five core meanings and their five agonistic counterparts are summarized in Table 1.2. These pairings do not present a set of dialectical or directly opposing relationships. Rather, they highlight the assortment of logical discrepancies, tensions, and other variations in meaning-making that emerged in the discourses I examined. Together, these ten meanings do not fall along a simple continuum. Rather, they relate to one another in a variety of registers: some speak directly to the dictionary definitions detailed above, some are more specific to particular discursive contexts, and some directly challenge one another.

The typology, therefore, captures the multidimensional nature of talent’s discursive function in the dissertation’s three case studies, and in American discourses more broadly.⁵⁶ Unlike taxonomies or keys, which are unidimensional classifications that divide items into binaries or parallel classes based on a bounded set of empirical data, a typology is a conceptually-driven mode of organization that allows for more than one character or facet to emerge in the process of categorization. The dimensions of typologies generally comprise concepts designed to aid the scholar in analysis, rather than to represent pre-established empirical categories.⁵⁷

I am not the first to observe that musical talent carries meanings in a number of registers. Henry Kingsbury noted that the term’s polysemy is apparent in its wide variety of usages, listing “talent as potential, as differentiation, as moral responsibility for development, and as intrapersonal immanence” and observing that “these various meanings of talent receive differing emphases in

⁵⁶ Kenneth D. Bailey, *Typologies and Taxonomies: An Introduction to Classification Techniques* (SAGE, 1994).

⁵⁷ Margaret Kartomi’s interpretation of classificational schemes in her analysis of musical cultures and their instruments (an analysis that be applied to conceptions of musical skills as readily as the instruments on which those skills are performed) also offers a helpful explanation of a typological classification. See Margaret J. Kartomi, *On Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), xvi.

different contexts and can be seen as at least occasionally mutually exclusive.”⁵⁸ Kingsbury, however, did not further discuss or analyze this broad range of meanings and their separate implications.

1	Gift	Non-Genius
2	Inheritance	Cultivation
3	Potentiality	Skill
4	Passion	Impact
5	Speed	Dis-Ability

Table 1.2 Five core meanings of talent.

The order in which I present the types does not convey a particular hierarchy, though I have generally arranged them from most pervasive (both in the case studies and in my broader research) to more uncommon or discursively localized. Each section begins with one or two examples taken from the dissertation’s case study data: the diverse nineteenth-century discourse about Thomas Wiggins analyzed in Chapter 2, comments by contestants and judges on twenty-first century talent shows discussed in Chapter 3, and perspectives of the violin pedagogues at the center of Chapter 4. I do not provide extensive information about the identities of individual speakers or the full historical or musical contexts of their comments, as the case study chapters further explicate the ways these different meanings of talent emerge in more specific instances of discursive struggle. Following each of these epigraphs, I consider important genealogical and etymological moments in the history of particular meanings and analyze the ways these meanings function in discourse.

⁵⁸ Kingsbury, *Music Talent & Performance*, 80.

1. Gift

Accustomed to regard it as a gift, improved and perfected by cultivation and practice, we here find it perfectly developed in a blind Negro boy, and constitution a part of his nature, as much so as the color of his skin.⁵⁹

Anonymous writer for *The Baltimore Sun*, 1860

I'm William J. McGowan and I'm a singer. I have a natural God-given gift to sing and I've never taken a lesson at all.⁶⁰

Contestant on *America's Got Talent*, 2006

Musical talent is frequently described as a gift.⁶¹ In this sense, talent becomes a thing, an immutable object, a possession. The gift of musical talent is not something given gradually or piecemeal, through education or experience, but all at once; it is innate, always and already. This musical gift holds value—both within a symbolic and ethically governed gift economy, and within more utilitarian, explicitly economic systems.⁶² In its adjectival form, “gifted” is frequently used synonymously with “talented,” gesturing not only toward the common terminological pairing of “gifted and talented” that solidified as a category in educational discourse in the first decades of the twentieth century, but also toward the notion that giftedness is understood as a category of identity. One does not merely possess a gift that one can lose or discard at will; one *is* gifted.

As the above collection of dictionary definitions illustrate, before talents were aptitudes, they were gold. In the Biblical parable etymologically responsible for the term as it exists today in German, English, and the Romance languages, these units of gold were bound to an imperative of

⁵⁹ “‘Tom’ the Musical Wonder,” *The Baltimore Sun*, June 27, 1860, Vol. XLVII edition, sec. Page 1.

⁶⁰ Russell Norman, “Episode 102,” *America's Got Talent* (NBC Television, June 28, 2006).

⁶¹ As George Lakoff importantly pointed out, such metaphorization is not a superficial linguistic mechanism, but a way of meaningfully structuring our thought. This process of mapping a source domain onto a target domain, Lakoff argues, is ontological and epistemic, and governs the way we understand the meanings and symbolic physics of a concept—such as talent as gift. George Lakoff, “A Figure of Thought,” no. 3 (1986).

⁶² A utilitarian viewpoint would argue more that “talent is what talent does,” to borrow a phrase from Frances Ferguson’s discussion of utilitarianism and pornography. As she explains, “utilitarianism, by emphasizing the importance of evaluating actions in relation to others and through others, makes the perception of value more significant than the perception of essences and identities.” Frances Ferguson, *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 2.

investment, augmentation, and return: the parabolic servant who buried the talent he was given, like a seed that would never sprout, was castigated and cast out into the darkness. Here is an excerpt of that parable, from the book of Matthew:

For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. [...] He who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, "You wicked and slothful servant! [...] Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."⁶³

As the definitions in Table 1.1 evince, this “Parable of the Talents” marks a formative moment in the discursive history of talent—etymologically as well as ethically and symbolically. Here, the talents in question are a unit of currency, specifically a block of gold weighing as much as a person.⁶⁴ Each servant in the parable received different quantities of talents “according to his ability,” which could indicate that each servant was rewarded for his ability in a meritocratic sense, or that he was simply given the amount he was physically able to carry (perhaps a commentary on “natural capacity”).⁶⁵ In either case, readers of the parable do not know the precise circumstances that led to this uneven distribution of talents, as is the case in most encounters between “gifted” individuals and those encountering them. While the servant given the most talents felt fortunate and financially secure enough to invest his capital in the local economy, the servant with a single talent kept his gift to himself, as his resources were limited and he was not willing to risk losing more in a system that had already treated him unfairly. This servant was ultimately punished for hiding his talent, as it had been

⁶³ 25 Matthew 14-30 (NIV).

⁶⁴ A. R. Burns, *Money and Monetary Policy in Early Times* (Routledge, 2013).

⁶⁵ William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994); Lou Galloway, *Hidden Secrets of God's Economy* (Xulon Press, 2008).

a temporary gift and was not truly his to keep. The parable openly portrays talents as unequally distributed, maintaining that we should nevertheless capitalize upon the talents given to us, despite evident imbalances.⁶⁶ According to this parable, then, talent is a gift received rather than something voluntarily selected; it is a literal form of capital; it is bestowed in unequal quantities; it is given with the specific intent that its owner will invest it in the local economy. Each of these qualities has been mined for meaning in Biblical and popular writings in the ensuing centuries, and they have remained intertwined with more modern, abilities-oriented understandings of talent.⁶⁷

The metaphorical economy of talent as a gift and talented individuals as “gifted”—either from God, the devil, or nature—appears repeatedly in all three case studies.⁶⁸ Regardless of their Biblical proximity, discourses that refer to musical “gifts” carry a series of ethical imperatives, entangling the receiver in a metaphorical gift economy. In his influential examination of gift exchange, Marcel Mauss contended in 1924 that gifts involve a series of obligations and imbalances, drawing upon anthropological and critical research to argue that a gift-giver does not only give an

⁶⁶ Further, the composition of the parable implies that readers are intended to identify with the least endowed servant, encouraging those with fewer talents to accept what they have been given. Some interpretations of this message are more critical, understanding the parable as sanctioning economic (and, by metaphorical extension, educational) inequalities; other interpretations might interpret the message as encouraging industriousness in spite of difference, and to reassure readers that they are all equal in the eyes of God, regardless of their economic or intellectual endowments.

⁶⁷ To provide just a few more historically recent representative examples of these interpretations, an anonymous “layman” wrote for the *Jamestown Journal* in 1873, following a detailed exegesis of the parable in question, “Misusing your talents, whether it be health, strength, property, or intellect, and not using them at all, are equally wrong. The droves of walking smoke stacks going up and down the streets, loungers on the sidewalks, the click of billiard balls, the rattling of wine and beer cups, all equally tell of the waste of time, health and money, which are God given talents, for which you must one day give an account.” Layman, “Serious Reading: Lay Sermon,” *Jamestown Journal*, September 12, 1873. Or, a writer for the *Charlotte Observer* in 1912 offered a summary of a recent sermon, which noted that many understand the parable’s talents to “represent any natural aptitude, ability, or qualification for doing anything useful for mankind, as a talent for art or music. These natural gifts are gifts of God and we shall be answerable to God for their use or abuse, for the employment or neglect of any natural qualification we may possess.” “The Parables of Kingdom of God: Rev. Dr. D. H. Rolston Preaches Forceful Sermon on Parable of the Talents. The Application Made. The Christian’s Duty Today Is That of Utilizing and Realizing on Talents Committed to Him.,” *Charlotte Daily Observer*, March 27, 1916.

⁶⁸ As I discuss further in Chapter 2, there has historically been a diabolical complement to conceptions of musical gifts’ divine origin, from Niccolò Paganini to Robert Johnson’s Faustian deal with the devil. Regarding the increasing secularization of this conception, Shenk has noted on the giver of this gift that in the twentieth century “the presumed source of a person’s natural endowment shifted from God-given to gene-given, but the basic notion of giftedness remained substantially the same.” David Shenk, *The Genius in All of Us: New Insights into Genetics, Talent, and IQ* (Anchor Books, 2011).

object, but part of himself, creating a social bond.⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida later elaborated that genuine gifts, those without “reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt,” are impossible.⁷⁰

Accordingly, a person with a musical aptitude understood as a gift is automatically implicated in a system that necessitates some form of reciprocity—at the very least, for instance, by “giving” a concert that an audience “receives.”

This idea of giftedness and its role in a symbolic gift economy has become tied both to Jeffersonian and Galtonian paradigms of innateness, especially in educational contexts.⁷¹ Indeed, the field of “gifted education” emerged soon after Galton’s career as an icon of the American progressive education movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷² The first systematic treatment of “giftedness” was a longitudinal study conducted by American psychologist Lewis Terman, commonly known as the Terman Study of the Gifted.⁷³ His work on the study having commenced in 1921, Terman concluded after a number of years that “intellect and achievement are far from perfectly correlated. Why this is so, what circumstances affect the fruition of human talent, are questions of [...] transcendent importance.”⁷⁴ Leta Stetter Hollingworth, who investigated with Terman, worked to establish special programs for gifted students, heading several pioneering gifted schools in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s. She specifically addressed the issue of musical gifts in her influential book, *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture*, engaging with

⁶⁹ It is worth noting that the years that Mauss was writing were during the surge of gifted education research, especially in America. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Routledge, 2002).

⁷⁰ A list taken from Derrida’s consideration of Mauss’s treatment of the gift in Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction* (Psychology Press, 2003).

⁷¹ Jefferson discussed various gifts, including musical ones, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*; Galton used the word “gifted” frequently in *Hereditary Genius*, mirroring a dramatic uptick in the word’s usage around that time. Google n-gram data (measuring historical word frequency within the English language corpus) indicates that the word “gifted” reached new heights from the 1840s to the 1860s in particular. A second upsurge in the word’s usage occurred between 1910 and 1930, which corresponds with the institution of “gifted and talented” programs across the country.

⁷² Jennifer L. Jolly, *A History of American Gifted Education* (Routledge, 2018).

⁷³ Lewis Madison Terman, *Genetic Studies of Genius: Mental and Physical Traits of a Thousand Gifted Children*, by L. M. Terman, Assisted by B. T. Baldwin, Edith Bronson, and Others (Stanford University Press, 1925).

⁷⁴ Lewis Madison Terman, *Genetic Studies of Genius: The Gifted Child Grows up; Twenty-Five Years’ Follow-up of a Superior Group*, by L. M. Terman and M. H. Oden (Stanford University Press, 1947). The longitudinal study continued well after Terman’s own death, with the last data collected in the 1980s.

the work of psychologist Carl Seashore, whose contributions I explore later. As Hollingworth noted (in one of the most extreme appraisals of the various categories of giftedness she covers in the book), “Musical sensitivity is inborn and probably cannot be increased in any respect by training. If the various elements are not present in amount and combination constituting gift for music, no course of training will supply the lack.”⁷⁵ The category of “gifted and talented” has remained firmly entrenched in educational politics, as well as popular discourses around musicality. Indeed, the basic assumption of contemporary advocates of gifted education is an explicitly multiculturalist, Jeffersonian one. As the website for the National Association for Gifted Children explains, “Too many students do not receive appropriately challenging curriculum and services and as a result, fail to reach their potential.”⁷⁶

The meaning and metaphor of talent as a gift is one of the most pervasive, both in historical and contemporary contexts, and the other meaning types discussed here frequently intersect with gifts and giftedness. Marcel Mauss, for instance, has reflected on the interesting etymological origins of “gift,” which in its old German usage held the paired meanings of “gift” and “poison.”⁷⁷ The idea of musicality as dually a gift and a blight comes up most directly in the final meaning in the typology, which discusses the relationship between exceptional abilities and dis-abilities.

⁷⁵ Hollingworth, *Gifted Children*, 207.

⁷⁶ “Including Diverse Learners in Gifted Education Programs and Services: National Association for Gifted Children,” accessed June 20, 2018, <http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/timely-topics/including-diverse-learners-gifted-education-programs>.

⁷⁷ John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* (Clarendon Press, 1997), 102. Later scholars such as Ronald Radano and J. Griffith Rollefson have invoked this dual meaning in their discussions of the “gift of black music,” as Chapter 2 discusses further. As Radano notes, “If the sorrow songs voice the passive sorrow of former slaves, they also play a seditious role in undoing white authority, in much the same way that the actual practice of poisoning masters during slavery abruptly concluded the reign of domination.” Ronald Michael Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 283; J. Griffith Rollefson, *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 75.

Non-Genius

We utterly deny that he is endowed with the qualities which go to make up the sum total of a musical genius. Extraordinary memory is not needed for this, but a faultless ear and a poetic temperament.⁷⁸

H. J. Wiesel, *Dwight's Journal of Music*, 1863

I felt like I had been hit by a tornado. Wow, look at what these children can do, they must all be geniuses ... and I remember Dr. Honda coming to the microphone in that concert saying, you might think that these are the geniuses of Japan but actually they are normal children who have been trained and immersed in a special way of education.⁷⁹

Ronda Cole, 2014

Musical talent is not always seen as an immutable gift, a “thing” that one does or does not possess. Instead, it is often characterized as a scaling or gradable category, to consider the concept in grammatical terms. One can be a little talented, very talented, more talented. Musical genius, in contrast, is non-scaling: one generally cannot be a partial or extreme genius. Posed differently, genius is not something teachers evaluate, or something rated or graded among a large group. Often, then, “talent” is intended to mean that which is exceptional, but still within reasonable bounds of human ability. As Edward Young succinctly summarized this understanding in *Conjectures on Original Composition* in 1759, “for genius is from heaven, learning from man.”⁸⁰ The difference between this understanding of talented musicians and the rest is one of degree; the difference between geniuses and the rest is one of kind.

Arthur Schopenhauer influentially contrasted the idea of talent with that of genius, a concept central to an aesthetic philosophy that highlighted music’s unique power to express the will directly rather than to objectify or depict ideas.⁸¹ As he noted in *The World as Will and Representation*,

⁷⁸ H. J. Wiesel, “Blind Tom,” *Dwight's Journal of Music* 22, no. 17 (January 24, 1863): 340–41.

⁷⁹ Interview with Ronda Cole, September 2014.

⁸⁰ Edward Young and Samuel Richardson, *Conjectures on Original Composition: In a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* (A. Millar and R. and J. Dodsley, 1759).

⁸¹ Barbara Hannan, *The Riddle of the World: A Reconsideration of Schopenhauer's Philosophy: A Reconsideration of Schopenhauer's Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Dale Jacquette, *Schopenhauer, Philosophy and the Arts* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Talent is able to achieve what is beyond other people's capacity to achieve, yet not what is beyond their capacity of apprehension; therefore it at once finds its appreciators. The achievement of genius, on the other hand, transcends not only others' capacity of achievement, but also their capacity of apprehension; therefore they do not become immediately aware of it. Talent is like the marksman who hits a target which others cannot reach; genius is like the marksman who hits a target, as far as which others cannot even see.⁸²

For Schopenhauer, geniuses are forces of pure individuality—in their own combination of traits, and in their contribution to human creative expression. Talent, on the other hand, is merely increased aptitude for the depiction of ideas or the objectification of the will. As Schopenhauer observed in *The Art of Literature*, “A man of learning is a man who has learned a great deal; a man of genius, one from whom we learn something which the genius has learned from nobody.”⁸³ By the 1870s, Schopenhauer's writings on music and the fine arts had gained, in Nietzsche's words, “ascendancy in Europe,” intimately influencing Wagner's musical approaches and philosophies, among many others.⁸⁴ In his essay on “The Problems of Teaching Art” in *Style and Idea*, for instance, Schoenberg expresses a view of genius as opposed to talent taken directly from Schopenhauer: “So the genius really learns only from himself, the man of talent mainly from others. The genius learns from nature—his own nature—the man of talent from art.”⁸⁵

Schopenhauer's model of genius and talent as fundamentally different states of creative subjectivity represent only one conception of their relationship, however. Indeed, the more dominant Jeffersonian and Galtonian conceptions of talent relate to the notion of genius in highly complex and often contradictory ways. While talent is often used in a similar sense as genius (as in Tia DeNora's discussion of “talent and genius as fundamentally social achievements,” for instance), to indicate that an individual possesses an extraordinary ability or “gift” that others do not have,

⁸² Arthur Schopenhauer and E. F. J. Payne, *The World as Will and Representation* (Courier Corporation, 1966).

⁸³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Literature* (Macmillan, 1910).

⁸⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Alexander Tille, and William August Haussmann, *A Genealogy of Morals* (Macmillan, 1897).

⁸⁵ Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (University of California Press, 1975).

sometimes a pronouncement of talent specifically indicates a lack of something greater, something realized, as with Schopenhauer’s statement above.⁸⁶ This sense of talent, focusing on the potentially negative side of potentiality—that it may never undergo a perfect transformation from potentiality to actuality—emphasizes that the very nature of drawing attention to an individual’s process or potential implies that it has not yet become whatever its potential is posited to be. It was this meaning of the word that one of the judges on *America’s Got Talent* was hoping to avoid when he described of a young contestant named Adrian Romoff, “you’re not just talented, you’re a genius!”

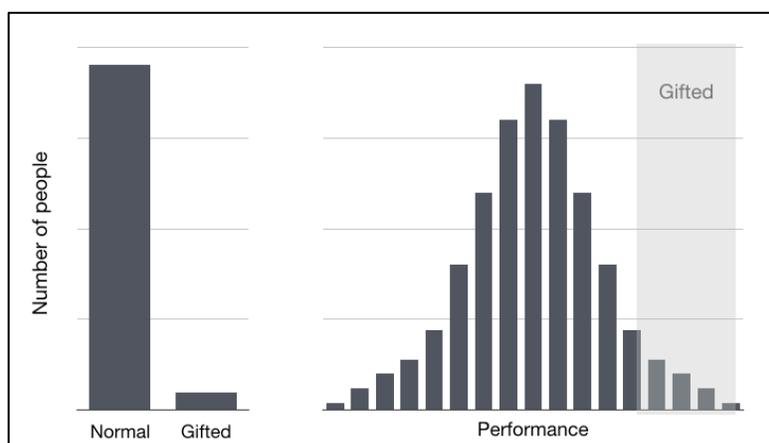


Figure 1.1: Giftedness conceived as a binary (left) versus a normal distribution (right). Image by author.

Despite their different metaphorical modes of dividing the population, understandings of talent as “giftedness” and as “non-genius” are not always mutually exclusive. In twentieth and twenty-first century educational discourses, for example, “giftedness” is sometimes understood as a non-scaling trait: some students are placed in gifted programs and are designated as “gifted,” and others are not (represented on the left side of Figure 1.1).⁸⁷ This method of categorizing students,

⁸⁶ Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1803* (University of California Press, 1995).

⁸⁷ Indeed, educational literature has not settled upon how exactly to define “gifted”—the literature still debates whether it is based on performance or on some assessment of possibility, or whether it is synonymous with “talented” or used to make some type of distinction? Christina Borders, Stephanie Woodley, and Christina Moore compiled a table of the multiple working definitions of talent (Table 1 in their chapter). See Elizabeth Moore, Stephanie Woodley, and Christina Borders, “Inclusion and Giftedness,” in *Gifted Education: Current Perspectives and Issues*, vol. 26, *Advances in Special Education* 26 (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014), 127–46. One influential source Moore et al. include is Gagne

however, does not always support this binary mode of designation. Indeed, many educational discourses describe students' giftedness as distributed normally among an imagined bell curve (right side of Figure 1.1), recognizing a variety of different levels of "talent" or "potential" despite the ultimate segregation of students into gifted and non-gifted classrooms.

2. *Inheritance*

Young Forrest [O'Connor] not only inherited some of his father's facility with the mandolin, he also bears a remarkable resemblance to his dad at that age.⁸⁸

John Lawless, *Bluegrass Today*, 2016

LR: "Any more sisters and brothers?"

KP: "It's obviously in the family"

LR: "This could be a family affair. [...] I think the talent is in the family."⁸⁹

Lionel Richie and Katy Perry, *American Idol*, 2018

For the majority of its history in American discourses, musical talent has been considered by many to be at least partially (if not entirely) a hereditary trait: something not only innate, but genetic. The logics that situate this specifically Galtonian meaning of talent are the same ones that posit essential racial differences regarding musicality and musical ability, as well as the ones that produced the eugenics movement—both in its unadulterated form in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in more insidious but nonetheless genetically oriented contemporary contexts. This meaning has circulated widely in educational, popular, and scientific discourses, as the two examples above show; it opposes a Jeffersonian understanding (in its modernized iteration) that talent is randomly distributed and may be discovered in any socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, or gender group.

(1985), who proposes a distinction between giftedness ("the possession and use of untrained and spontaneously expressed natural abilities" and talent ("superior mastery of systematically developed abilities [...] that places a child's achievement within the upper 10% of age-peers who are active in that field").

⁸⁸ John Lawless, "O'Connor Family Band to Rounder," *Bluegrass Today* (blog), February 3, 2016, <https://bluegrasstoday.com/oconnor-family-band-to-rounder/>.

⁸⁹ Russell Norman, "Nashville Auditions," *American Idol*, (ABC, October 19, 2017).

To pierce another moment in time to consider the conceptual genealogy of the notion that talent is genealogical, let us visit a well-known anecdote from the third book of Plato's *Republic*:

While all of you, in the city, are brothers, we will say in our tale, yet God in fashioning those of you who are fitted to hold rule, mingled gold in their generation, for which reason they are the most precious—but in the helpers, silver, and iron and brass in the farmers and other craftsmen. And, as you are all akin, though for the most part you will breed after your kinds, it may sometimes happen that a golden father would beget a silver son, and that a golden offspring would come from a silver sire, and that the rest would, in like manner, be born of one another.⁹⁰

In this passage, Socrates presents “our tale” as a myth to be told to citizens for the better good, offering up the idea that each social class is created by inherently different materials—gold, silver, iron—which determine their role in society. Though the understanding of talent as an inborn quality is straightforward in some ways, the above passage adds important layers of complexity to this notion of innateness. The myth could be taken as essentially truthful, or as a more deceptive portrayal of the type of naturalizing frames placed on social hierarchies to justify existing inequalities.⁹¹ If we read the myth as a general argument for heritable talents, it would imply that individual differences are generally inherited along familial and explicitly racial lines—the essential argument of Galtonian understandings of talent.

But this myth, which indeed is often referred to as Plato's “Noble Lie,” has also been interpreted as a non-truth, namely that there are no influential inborn differences that transcend cultural, familial, or educational background, but society has nevertheless come to believe that some people are made of gold while others are made of bronze.⁹² Such a reading is vital for this

⁹⁰ Plato and Allan David Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (Basic Books, 1991).

⁹¹ As Wendy Doniger reminds us, “The word *myth* has two very strong, very opposite meanings, depending on one's point of view: ‘truth’ and ‘lie.’ Even the proto-demythologizer himself, Plato, spoke with a forked tongue when he spoke about myths.” Wendy Doniger and Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁹² An interesting additional perspective on self-deception in the interest of maintaining social order is Sartre's notion of Bad Faith, or self-deception, where individuals act according to the identities they have established, believing, in other words, that their social role is equivalent to their existence. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (Open Road Media, 2012).

dissertation's argument: whether or not exceptional abilities are inborn, individuals come to perceive these differences, often constructed by societal systems or cultural categories, as natural or predetermined.⁹³ This “noble lie” follows the same logic as Bourdieu's concept of *misrecognition*, which functions as a process of systematic forgetting. Regardless of how skills are acquired—monetary investment, gradual enculturation, exploitation of others—such advantages are retroactively viewed as innate abilities and individuals are credited for their accomplishments or their realizing of their potentials, musical or otherwise.⁹⁴ As Nadine Hubbs succinctly explained, “Misrecognition serves to justify and naturalize, and thus to conserve and compound, the privilege of individuals who already possess the capital to acquire elite knowledge and ‘gifts.’”⁹⁵ In the same vein as Bourdieu's misrecognition, this latter reading of the Noble Lie echoes one of the dissertation's central claims: that talent is always something performed and perceived within a particular social context, and those perceptions (whether or not they are grounded in biological fact) are what allow talented individuals to conserve and further acquire social, cultural, and economic capital.

The golden metaphor at the heart of Plato's narrative has endured. Indeed, the talent currency mentioned in the Biblical parable above was in wide circulation during Plato's lifetime.⁹⁶ Golden analogies often appear in the dissertation's case studies, perpetuating discursively ambiguous associations with heredity. In Chapter 3, for instance, references to gold arise both in the formats and the talk of contemporary talent shows: *America's Got Talent* judges who wish to declare the superiority of a particularly talented contestant hit the “golden buzzer” to automatically forward

⁹³ A Madeline Aruffo notes, “The necessity of the noble lie means that a just city is incomplete unless it has this artificial, contrived aspect.” Madeline Aruffo, “Problems with the Noble Lie,” *The Journal of the Core Curriculum*, no. 23 (Spring 2014), <http://www.bu.edu/core/community/the-core-journal/xxiii/>.

⁹⁴ Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Univ of California Press, 2014).

⁹⁵ Hubbs, 16.

⁹⁶ During Plato's lifetime, however, the Attic Talent (also known as the Athenian Talent) was most commonly measured in silver. Also, I do not mean to imply that Plato was responsible for the enduring golden metaphor for superior (hereditary) endowments, but that this example is emblematic of such imagery.

them to the final round, and successful first-round *American Idol* auditionees are handed a “golden ticket” as an emblem of their worthiness. While the golden residues that cling to understandings of talent do not directly imply heredity, they allow speakers to summon Galtonian meanings in forwarding certain discursive agendas.

As I discussed in the introduction, researchers in psychology, education, and elsewhere continue to debate the “nature or nurture” question posed by Galton. Throughout the history of this scientific debate, the example of music has served as a prominent case study, from Carl Seashore’s “The Inheritance of Musical Talent” to more recent studies of twins aiming to identify the “genetic architecture for aptitude and talent” within specific domains of expertise.⁹⁷ While it is not necessary to summarize that research more extensively here, suffice to say that the question of whether (musical) exceptionalism is inherited along genetic lines remains a heated and consequential site of discursive struggle.

Cultivation

Talent is no accident of birth. In today’s society a good many people seem to have the idea that if one is born without talent, there is nothing he can do about it; they simply resign themselves to what they consider to be their ‘fate.’ Consequently, they go through life without living it to the full or ever knowing life’s true joy. That is man’s greatest tragedy.⁹⁸

Shinichi Suzuki, pedagogue, 1983

At the start of this chapter, I noted that the types of meanings cannot be arranged on a simple spectrum. Many debates over the meaning of talent, however, have focused on a *perceived* continuum between heredity and environment—between nature and nurture. This debate needs not be extensively rehashed in this context, as it has been deliberated extensively in philosophical,

⁹⁷ C. E. Seashore, “The Inheritance of Musical Talent,” *The Musical Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1920): 586–98; Mosing et al., “Practice Does Not Make Perfect No Causal Effect of Music Practice on Music Ability”; Anna A. E. Vinkhuyzen et al., “The Heritability of Aptitude and Exceptional Talent Across Different Domains in Adolescents and Young Adults,” *Behavior Genetics* 39, no. 4 (July 2009): 380–92.

⁹⁸ Suzuki and Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*, iv.

psychological, educational, and other literature, and I have already outlined its ideological contours in the introduction. In short, however, thinkers from Aristotle to Avicenna to John Locke to John Watson to Shinichi Suzuki, quoted above, have mounted various arguments against the assertion that knowledge, ability, or specialized aptitudes are innate—that inequalities in human achievement are largely based on inborn difference.⁹⁹ Rather, all people are literally created equal, we are each born as a *tabula rasa*, subsequently shaped and influenced by our specific upbringings, cultural contexts, and life experiences.¹⁰⁰ As I discussed in the introduction, while some extremists like Walton and Suzuki have argued that human ability is absolutely a creation of one’s environment rather than their heredity, most present-day scholars, educators, musicians, and others (for instance, all of the interlocutors in Chapter 4) believe that we are a product of both.

Over the course of the twentieth century, an increasing number of researchers began to assert that the excellence and exceptional achievements of individuals previously explained away as innate were in fact largely the result of environmental and educational factors. A number of empirical studies came to this conclusion (albeit not going unchallenged). As Michael Howe, Jane Davidson, and John Sloboda concluded in 1998, “An analysis of positive and negative evidence and arguments suggests that differences in early experiences, preferences, opportunities, habits, training,

⁹⁹ Moreover, this rough trajectory could be expanded beyond the bounds of a hegemonic Eurocentric intellectual history to consider the nearly countless other ways of understanding the origins of knowledge and ability. Aristotle, *De Anima* (Cosimo, 2008); John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (T. Tegg and Son, 1836); Shams Inati, *Ibn Sina’s Remarks and Admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics* (Columbia University Press, 2014); John Broadus Watson, *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* (Lippincott, 1919); Suzuki and Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*. As John Watson, the founder of behaviorism, famously stated, “Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train hi to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.”

¹⁰⁰ I refer here to the paradox of meritocracy mentioned earlier in the chapter as at the heart of the American dream, the promise that “all men are created equal”: while all are equal, some are given innate talents that allow them to excel more within a meritocratic system. As George Orwell famously and satirically portrayed this logic in *Animal Farm* (originally a critique of Stalinism, but nevertheless relevant as a critique in this case), “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” I. L. Baker, *George Orwell, Animal Farm* (London: J. Brodie, 1961).

and practice are the real determinants of excellence.”¹⁰¹ Recent studies like Duckworth’s work on Grit (which argues that hard work is the true determiner of excellence in the long run) and Dweck’s assertions that a learner’s mindset is far more influential than any inherited proclivities, have begun to meaningfully influence popular understandings of the factors that influence exceptional ability.¹⁰²

3. Potentiality

We could hear how young we thought you were. But more importantly, we could hear the potential, and that’s what exciting for us as coaches. This girl could be a star.¹⁰³

Blake Shelton, *The Voice*, 2015

There are approximately three million gifted and talented children in grades K-12 nationwide, of whom only perhaps a quarter have been identified and receive support. Clearly, there is a need to help identify these very able children and assist them in realizing their full potential.¹⁰⁴

National Society for the Gifted and Talented, 2018

Rather than being conceived as fully present and actualized, like the unrivaled greatness of a genius, the eminence of those with talent is often understood as imminent. According to this meaning, talent is not actuality, but potentiality. The power and paradox of this understanding is the underlying assumption that this capacity (musical or otherwise) is able to somehow be detected or discerned: talent’s not-yet-fulfilled status can be perceived as such, rather than analyzing something like a musical performance or audition at face value. And indeed, therein lies the logical (and

¹⁰¹ Michael J. A. Howe, Jane W. Davidson, and John A. Sloboda, “Innate Talents: Reality Or Myth?,” *Journal, Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 1998.

¹⁰² Duckworth, *Grit*; Dweck, *Mindset*. Gladwell has succinctly described the results of one of Dweck’s research studies: “Those praised for their intelligence were reluctant to tackle difficult tasks, and their performance on subsequent tests soon began to suffer. Then Dweck asked the children to write a letter to students at another school, describing their experience in the study. She discovered something remarkable: forty per cent of those students who were praised for their intelligence lied about how they had scored on the test, adjusting their grade upward. They weren’t naturally deceptive people, and they weren’t any less intelligent or self-confident than anyone else. They simply did what people do when they are immersed in an environment that celebrates them solely for their innate ‘talent.’” Malcolm Gladwell, “The Talent Myth,” *The New Yorker*, July 15, 2002, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/07/22/the-talent-myth>.

¹⁰³ Alan Carter, “Season 8, Episode 4,” *The Voice* (NBC Television, March 3, 2015).

¹⁰⁴ National Society for the Gifted and Talented website. “NSGT - About the Society,” accessed May 1, 2016, <http://www.nsgt.org/about-the-society/>.

logistical) problem of potentiality: it is understood to be discernible, but the thing discerned is only partially apparent. As such, talent as potentiality poses a particularly potent form of hegemonic naturalization, identifying available visual and sonic signifiers as obvious, “common sense” evidence of a greater, more realized future state. Upon identifying possessors of potential—of “gifts”—those with the power to aid the actualization of these seemingly nascent musical stars feel authorized, or even ethically obligated, to do so.

This somewhat puzzling notion of potentiality has a long historical genealogy. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle posited two states of being that all entities, including people, occupy to varying extents: potentiality (*dunamis*, Latin: *potentia*) and actuality (*energeia*, Latin: *actualitas*).¹⁰⁵ It is these two principles and their terminologies that physicist William Rankine borrowed in his 1853 paper on the transformation of energy, asserting that there is a form of energy not immediately apparent or measurable which can be transmitted into a pre-established quantity of actual, or kinetic, energy. Under the proper circumstances, this transformation can be entirely conserved so that an object’s preexisting quantity of potential energy determines the amount of kinetic energy that can be drawn from the object.¹⁰⁶ This concept—that an object (or person) contains a predetermined amount of potential that determines the amount of energy (or achievement) that can be drawn from it—was translated to perceptions of educational and personal growth.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Aristotle, *The Metaphysics* (Courier Corporation, 2013). Aristotle and John Henry MacMahon, *The Metaphysics of Aristotle* (G. Bell and sons, 1896). The Latin translation of *dunamis* is *potentia*, the root of the current English word in question here.

¹⁰⁶ William John Rankine, “On the General Law of the Transformation of Energy,” *Philosophical Magazine Series 4* 5, no. 30 (February 1, 1853): 106–17.

¹⁰⁷ “Transforming Boston’s Untapped Talent into Mini Maestros,” *PBS NewsHour* (blog), accessed August 15, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/transforming-bostons-untapped-talent-mini-maestros/>; *Gifts, Talents and Challenges: Untapped Potential of Adults with FASD*. (University of Northern British Columbia (Canada), 2008); Robert K. Cooper, *The Other 90%: How to Unlock Your Vast Untapped Potential for Leadership and Life* (Crown Publishing Group, 2010); Michael Giudicissi, *Changing Lives: Achieving Your Untapped Potential* (Author’s Choice Publishing, 2006); Jack Lannom, *Untapped Potential: Turning Ordinary People into Extraordinary Performers* (Thomas Nelson Inc, 1998); Ian Robertson, *Mind Sculpture: Your Brain’s Untapped Potential* (Transworld, 2011).

Giorgio Agamben has elaborated upon this Aristotelian paradigm in his own thinking about potentiality. Engaging with Aristotle's distinctions, he differentiated between the idea of *generic* potentiality, "the one that is meant when we say, for example, that a child has the potential to know, or that he or she can potentially become the head of State," from what he refers to as the notion of *existing* potentiality.¹⁰⁸ This potentiality is "the one that belongs to someone who, for example, has knowledge or an ability." This conception of existing potentiality is at the heart of the type of talent at hand in this section: the musician who is practiced enough to signify exciting extensions of an existing set of abilities, the child who has learned quickly enough to signify some type of superiority (as I discuss further in the following section).

Similar to the concept of the gift, which obligates the recipient in some way, the possession of potential implies the obligation of its fulfillment, its actualization. Aristotle himself uses the metaphor of a seed repeatedly to describe this phenomenon—an image that comes up often in descriptions of talent, and an image that accentuates the imperative of planting it and allowing it to grow into what it was (naturally, genetically) designed to become.¹⁰⁹ This ethical component of talent's potentiality is conspicuous in the two opening quotations of this section. Both in the case of the contestant on *The Voice* and the imagined population of gifted children distributed across the country, discernable abilities are used as evidence for their potentiality—their *existing* potentiality.

While the idea of talent as potential is widely utilized to perpetuate existing cultural and social hierarchies, it is important to note that notions of potential can also be liberating, a way of directing utopian impulses, a way of imagining talent as a means to possibilities as yet unrealized. Talent as as-yet-unrealized potential was at the heart of W.E.B. Du Bois's conception of the Talented Tenth, that "potential aristocracy of learning and talent" which he posited as the key to his

¹⁰⁸ Giorgio Agamben and Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 179.

¹⁰⁹ Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*.

notion of racial uplift.¹¹⁰ And further, musical talent, and musical potentiality, was central to Du Bois's project. As David Gilbert noted, according to Du Bois, "The Sorrow songs, like the people who created them, were roughly hewn but brimming with immense potential."¹¹¹ Indeed, the process of imagining possibility, of recognizing what is not yet but what might be with some help, is at the heart of good teaching as it was explained by many interlocutors in Chapter 4. As Suzuki violin teacher Ronda Cole noted, for example, even with her youngest students of three or four years old, she teaches by visualizing their possibility, by imagining them as the future performer of a concerto and figuring out what tools and skills they need to get there.

Skill

I think when I was growing up, like most people will hear someone perform really well and say wow, you're so talented. Well they are, but they're talking about skill. And the evidence of accomplishment.¹¹²

Ronda Cole, violin teacher, 2014

"[They] had the talent come to them. With *Idol* and *Pop Stars*, we went to the world and brought the talent in."¹¹³

Nigel Lythgoe, *American Idol* Executive Producer, 2011

Some understandings of musical talent do not refer to origins or causes, such as the debates around hereditary and environmental influences discussed above. Instead, the word is simply used to mean that a certain level of skill or ability is present. Put simply, the talented are those who possess skills—however they came to possess them. In the music industry, like other industries, this meaning has been extended to the point where "talent" designates a population, a plurality of able performers: there are scouts for talent, managers of talent, talent agencies. While this meaning

¹¹⁰ Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Duke University Press, 2001), 37.

¹¹¹ David Gilbert, *The Product of Our Souls: Ragtime, Race, and the Birth of the Manhattan Musical Marketplace* (UNC Press Books, 2015), 38.

¹¹² Interview with Ronda Cole, September 2014.

¹¹³ Richard Rushfield, *American Idol: The Untold Story* (Hachette Books, 2011).

obviously contains implications about the origin of “the talent’s” talent, it is more utilitarian in its concern about what talent *does* rather than what talent *is*. Or, alternatively, what talent’s manifestation is rather than the process by which it has been acquired. This meaning’s concern with utility repurposes the noun “talent” to be synonymous with “people,” rather than an aptitude or even ability that those people possess. This conception, therefore, does not employ talent’s adjectival form: people are not talented; they *are* the talent.¹¹⁴

Moreover, since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a “war for talent.”¹¹⁵ When McKinsey and Company, the originators of this phrase, declared in 1998 that “better talent is worth fighting for,” they were referring to a population of able “performers” in the workplace. The world of industrial management has grappled with a definition of this thing for which there is a war, however. Usually it is defined tautologically, using terms that are equally loaded with contextual variability. According to the original McKinsey report, talent is the “best and brightest,” “the sum of a person's abilities... his or her intrinsic gifts, skills, knowledge, experience, intelligence, judgment, attitude, character and drive. It also includes his or her ability to learn and grow”¹¹⁶ Bradford Smart defines talent as “A players” who fall into the top 10 percent of performers, the “best of class.”¹¹⁷ In *High Potential: How to Spot, Manage and Develop Talented People at Work*, the authors define these talented people (using another neologistic noun) as “high potentials,” who “are driven; highly motivated; ambitious and competitive. Usually they are above average in intelligence, but not necessarily the

¹¹⁴ While this meaning is used often to refer to people who *are* the talent, corporate and music-industrial discourses that employ this meaning also simultaneously invoke other (inevitably related) meanings. For instance, that population who is the talent is made up of individuals who have talent—in any number of senses discussed here, from possessing a gift and future potentiality to having genetic advantages or being quick to learn, for instance.

¹¹⁵ Elizabeth G. Chambers et al., “The War for Talent,” *The McKinsey Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (June 22, 1998): 44.

¹¹⁶ Chambers et al. The authors quote one General Electric executive as saying, “Bet on the natural athletes, the ones with the strongest intrinsic skills.” He continues, “Don't be afraid to promote stars without specifically relevant experience, seemingly over their heads.”

¹¹⁷ Bradford D. Smart, *Topgrading: How Leading Companies Win by Hiring, Coaching, and Keeping the Best People* (Penguin, 2005).

most intelligent.”¹¹⁸ Jenny Roper, commenting that the business world has been as influenced as its educational counterpart by recent ideas like Dweck’s mindset theory, has noted that a large swath of the literature refers to “whole workforces as ‘the talent’” and whole human resource departments as “talent management.”¹¹⁹

The talent management agency entitled All American Speakers even discussed “talent buyers,” a term that harkens back to the first meaning of talent as a currency, a valuable object, something to be used in transactions. As the company explained on their website, “We are a booking agent for celebrity talent, including *American Idol* contestants and work on behalf of talent buyers, such as corporations, universities, non-profits or agencies interested in securing the services of a celebrity, entertainer or athlete for appearances, speaking engagements, endorsements and more.”¹²⁰ This personification of talent is often utilized in corporate and music-industrial contexts where individuals are seen as a product to be assessed, purchased, and utilized in the marketplace. As Lester K. Spence analogously summarized this transition from talent’s position as modifier to noun in the context of the workplace, “I’m not a business man; I’m a business, man.”¹²¹ In this system, the talented subject—the “talent”—is treated and conceptualized as human capital, as an autonomous and self-regulating actor.¹²²

Further, and more relevant to the scope of this project, this logic of talent as synonymous with ability has drifted into the educational realm: the neoliberalization of educational gatekeeping

¹¹⁸ Ian MacRae, Adrian Furnham, and Martin Reed, *High Potential: How to Spot, Manage and Develop Talented People at Work* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

¹¹⁹ Jenny Roper, “What Do We Mean When We Talk about Talent?,” *HR*, June 15, 2015.

¹²⁰ “Booking Agency for American Idol: Book Top American Idol Singers,” accessed June 16, 2018, https://www.allamericanspeakers.com/celebrity_booking_agency/American_Idol.php.

¹²¹ Lester K. Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* (Punctum Books, 2015).

¹²² Salman Türken et al., “Making Sense of Neoliberal Subjectivity: A Discourse Analysis of Media Language on Self-Development,” *Globalizations* 13, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 32–46. “Neoliberal subjects, therefore, espouse the idea of an individual who, through hard work and talent, can navigate inequalities and seize opportunities, without the support of a collective. The wider implication of this is that the individuals who do not have success only have themselves to blame.” David G. Collings, Kamel Mellahi, and Wayne F. Cascio, *The Oxford Handbook of Talent Management* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 526.

systems has led American families to understand the attainment of (musical) talent in a transactional way, seeing the cultivation and display of musical talent as a means to gain access to rarified social spaces like elite universities through an admissions advantage. As Kevin Magill and Arturo Rodriguez have observed, “Under neoliberalism parents and students are pushed to position themselves as consumers in an educational market, forced to make decisions based on the marketing of schools, test scores, and individualizing success or failure. The neoliberal era ensures freedom is seen as freedom for individuals to choose their educational paths, becoming ‘entrepreneurs’ of their own human capital to maximize their earning potential.”¹²³ In this system, students become “the talent,” assessed for their use-value and their prior performance.¹²⁴

4. *Passion*

The windows of [a student’s] soul must be cleaned and loosened, the sunshine of love (and love is intelligence) must enter first, before any knowledge can penetrate, except meaningless formulae and data, and if art cannot do that, what is it for?”

Constantin von Sternberg, 1897

You can’t make someone fall in love. You can create all the conditions. You can point in every way you want to. Psychological, achievement, tone quality, the yumminess of what this composer wrote right here, the beauty of the sound on your instrument: don’t you just love that tritone? There’s so many things to be interested in and fascinated, loving of, and if I can keep leading that way, then hopefully that’s how they start to think, listen, feel.¹²⁵

Ronda Cole, violin teacher, 2014

To some, true talent is not reducible to an array of educational experiences or the varying vicissitudes of inheritance. Instead, the *sine qua non* of talent is an individual’s passion, an enduring drive, a unique personal interest. According to this meaning, talent is synonymous with love, and it

¹²³ Kevin R. Magill and Arturo Rodriguez, *Imagining Education: Beyond the Logic of Global Neoliberal Capitalism* (IAP, 2017), 90.

¹²⁴ This is one example where the economies of talent for musicians and professional athletes intersect. In some contexts, individuals intentionally cultivate themselves as talent to make themselves acquirable, in an extreme capitulation to market logics. If individuals must be commodities, the logic goes, they will try to take control of the process of making themselves into such commodities, molding themselves to be attractive to potential buyers.

¹²⁵ Interview with Ronda Cole, September 10, 2014.

behaves like love: talent is (at) the heart of subjects' narratives of self-becoming—that thing which drives them, and completes them. Though the logic is somewhat tautological, individuals are talented at what they are “meant” to do—they are talented at what they love, and they love what they are talented at.¹²⁶ Their love for singing or running or dancing is the reason behind their subsequent accomplishments in that domain. This passion, this talent, acts as a force of overcoming; it overpowers economic adversities, educational inequalities, and even biological disadvantages. Like true love, this passion is unique to each person—every individual has his or her own special talent, and in this sense, everyone is “exceptional” in their own way.¹²⁷ As one writer for an inspirational lifestyle website summarized, “Every human being conceived carries with him or her that innate ability that is uniquely his or hers. It is like our finger print [sic]. Lots of people may carry the same ability, but the way we use ours will make us unique. These talents, gifts or strengths are our diamonds.”¹²⁸ Or, as self-help book authors Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica put it, “Being in your Element needs something more—passion. People who are in their Element take a deep delight and pleasure in what they do.”¹²⁹

The Latin verb *amare*, to love, is etymologically generative of the concept of the amateur, which in its earlier life had a positive valence—a description for someone whose motivations are not driven (and corrupted) by a feeling of necessity or a motivation for profit, but by passion alone.¹³⁰ For centuries prior to the Industrial Revolution, European noblemen were proud to be called

¹²⁶ Dan Wang, “Scenes of Feeling: Music and the Imagination of the Liberal Subject” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017), 1-2.

¹²⁷ This idea relates to something psychologists refer to as the “superiority illusion,” where the majority of people believe that they are exceptional, or better than average in any number of domains. As Garrison Keiler jokes in *Prairie Home Companion*, “Welcome to Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” Marsha T. Gabriel, Joseph W. Critelli, and Jullana S. Ee, “Narcissistic Illusions in Self-Evaluations of Intelligence and Attractiveness,” *Journal of Personality* 62, no. 1: 143–55; Makiko Yamada et al., “Superiority Illusion Arises from Resting-State Brain Networks Modulated by Dopamine,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 11 (March 12, 2013): 4363–67.

¹²⁸ Kassey Vilches, “7 Inspiring Reasons Why You Should Use Your Talents or Gifts,” *Medium* (blog), August 16, 2017, <https://medium.com/thrive-global/7-inspiring-reasons-why-you-should-use-your-talents-or-gifts-79d5063d4c4e>.

¹²⁹ Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything* (Penguin, 2009).

¹³⁰ Stephen Knott, *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

amateurs, as their pursuit of passion projects conveyed their class status and vast temporal and financial resources.¹³¹ As Schopenhauer, a recurring character in this typology, noted, “the greatest work has always come from such men [who pursue art for love], not from paid servants.”¹³² While amateurs (musical and otherwise) gained a less wholesome reputation during the nineteenth century and the increasing professionalization of domains like music, the archetype of the passionately talented amateur appears throughout the project, particularly in Chapter 3.¹³³

The notion of talent as passion is also prevalent in educational discourses, such as those explored in Chapter 4. Both teachers at the heart of that chapter mentioned that a student’s passion and enthusiasm for playing and practicing was the key to their flourishing—that thing that cannot be taught. As Henry Kingsbury relatedly remarked, “musical talent is that which can’t be taught to the few who can be taught it.”¹³⁴ The idea of passion is at the heart of the well-known concept of “grit,” a term coined by psychologist Angela Duckworth, that is defined as “a combination of perseverance and passion.”¹³⁵ Rather than focusing on innate aptitudes, Duckworth found that measuring individuals’ enthusiasm for a domain, and the dedication to practice that follows, is the best predictor of success. In other words, passion is at the heart of exceptional achievements. As she commented, pushing back against those who use the term “grit” to be synonymous with perseverance alone, “I think that the passion piece is at least as important. I mean, if you are really, really tenacious and dogged about a goal that’s not meaningful to you, and not interesting to you—

¹³¹ Knott.

¹³² Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays* (Clarendon Press, 1974), 481.

¹³³ Further, Nadine Hubbs has described an understanding, “carried over into modernism from Romanticism,” of the “the ardent, sometimes covetous, desire thus attaching to the identity, ‘artist.’ Such desire certainly attaches to the identity of the musician [...] Inspired in music’s devotees by its extraordinary penetrative powers, this desire is intensified by cultural constructions of talent (e.g. as inborn, ineffable, unlearnable) that regulate one’s achievement, or failure, in acquiring the consecrated status of ‘musician.’” Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (University of California Press, 2004), 136.

¹³⁴ Kingsbury, *Music Talent & Performance*, 82.

¹³⁵ Duckworth, *Grit*.

then that's just drudgery. It's not just determination—it's having a direction that you care about."¹³⁶

In contemplating why passion seems to be the key piece, and the piece that is often missing, Duckworth continues, “people can learn to work hard and be resilient, but to find something that would make you say, ‘This is so interesting to me — I’m so committed to it that I’m going to stick with it over years’ — that kind of passion may, in some ways, be harder to come by.”¹³⁷ As Chapter 4 interlocutor Ronda Cole observed after her four decades of violin instruction, “I’ve had so many children who didn’t look like they were going to shine in the end in any big way who ultimately did. And what tipped the scale was the love of it.”¹³⁸

Impact

He sweeps his hands over the keys with the air of a master, and then we behold the inspiration manifesting itself in his countenance and movements till our interest changes to awe, and we are dumb with astonishment. [...] A feeling of reverence steals over us as we behold this mysterious and sudden transformation.¹³⁹

Anonymous author, *Chicago Press and Tribune*, 1860

I don't think you *feel* like a star. You're not giving me that thing. I don't feel it.¹⁴⁰

Nikki Minaj, *American Idol*, 2012

As the section on potentiality has considered from a different perspective, the presence of talent is often understood as something located beyond, or perhaps behind, that which is sonically or visually discernable. This meaning of talent is particularly common in music-specific discourses, and it does not directly conflict with the understanding of talent as passion, but approaches the issues of talent's affective economies from a different vantage point. Unlike conceptions that define talent primarily as an innate gift, inherited aptitude, or latent potentiality, this meaning of talent does

¹³⁶ Melissa Dahl, “Don’t Believe the Hype About Grit, Pleads the Scientist Behind the Concept,” *The Cut*, May 9, 2016, <https://www.thecut.com/2016/05/dont-believe-the-hype-about-grit-pleads-the-scientist-behind-the-concept.html>.

¹³⁷ Dahl.

¹³⁸ Interview with Ronda Cole, September 2014.

¹³⁹ “A Black Prodigy in the Musical World: From the Baltimore Patriot,” *Chicago Press and Tribune*, February 7, 1860, sec. page 2.

¹⁴⁰ Russell Norman, “Milwaukee Auditions,” *American Idol*, (Fox Broadcasting Company, July 12, 2012).

not define it according to its causes, but its effects—its impact on onlookers. In other words, evidence of talent’s presence cannot ultimately be established within the performer, but within the audience.¹⁴¹ According to this meaning, if a music-making tree falls in the forest but nobody is around to hear it, it cannot be deemed talented, regardless of the sounds it produces. Rather than attempting to locate some central ontology of talent in musical or personal signifiers, this meaning is an epistemologically and phenomenologically oriented one. As one judge succinctly explained in the montage introducing the first episode of *The Voice*’s first season, “I won’t know until I feel it.”¹⁴²

This meaning’s focus on effect has much to do with affect and emotion. The effects that indicate the presence of talent are understood largely as embodied. Such effects are often affective in the sense of their transcending of signifiers, in their role as intensification of experience, and in their inability to be consciously accessed or controlled, as Brian Massumi has discussed.¹⁴³ Thus, appeals to affective and emotional effects are a common way in which onlookers differentiate performers who possess talent from those who do not. Despite acknowledging an auditioner’s technical proficiency as a vocalist, for instance, *American Idol* judge Nikki Minaj remarked in the quotation at the start of this section that the singer was nevertheless not talented enough to be admitted to the next round of the competition.

It is undeniable that many listeners experience powerful affective and emotional responses to some musical performances and not others. Researchers in psychology have worked to better understand the reasons behind the often-powerful affective and emotional responses that listeners experience.¹⁴⁴ While there have been some interesting findings—for instance, the existence of

¹⁴¹ This meaning, conceiving talent as something immediately discernible because of this emotional effect, intersects in interesting ways with moments of instant interpersonal attraction. In all three case studies, there are descriptions of the discernment of talent as something like love, as “talent at first sight.”

¹⁴² Alan Carter, “Season 1, Episode 1,” *The Voice* (NBC Television, April 26, 2011).

¹⁴³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (A&C Black, 2004).

¹⁴⁴ For instance, see Mitchell C. Colver and Amani El-Alayli, “Getting Aesthetic Chills from Music: The Connection between Openness to Experience and Frisson,” *Psychology of Music* 44, no. 3 (May 1, 2016): 413–27; Luke Harrison and

something researchers refer to as mirror neurons, which cause an unconscious “mirroring” of actions, intentions, and emotions of musical performers—the experiential, cultural, and contextual circumstances of each listener’s response have yet to be fully addressed in such research.¹⁴⁵

The notion of talent as the ability to affectively impact one’s listener is firmly situated in Western art music performance practice. Henry Kingsbury has discussed how the cultivation of feeling—in the performer, but ultimately in order to evoke feelings in one’s audience—was a central pedagogical emphasis for conservatory piano instructors. As he noted after observing the lessons of one piano student, “when contrasted with *musical*, the word *technical* refers to the absence of affective feeling or expression.”¹⁴⁶ This meaning also serves as a discursive mechanism of exclusion, positing those who do not manage to elicit such a response as untalented. For instance, one of the common racist narratives about Asian and Asian-American musicians is the group’s ostensible inability to serve as talented conduits of emotion and affect.¹⁴⁷ The Suzuki method of violin instruction discussed in Chapter 4 has been widely criticized for its inability to cultivate this type of “musicality.” As pianist Ronald Cavaye noted, what the method cultivates is students’ ability “to be a unified machine but does not demonstrate an ability to create art.”¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Violinist Mark O’Connor has criticized the method as not about the cultivation of the type of musicality he values,

Psyche Loui, “Thrills, Chills, Frissons, and Skin Orgasms: Toward an Integrative Model of Transcendent Psychophysiological Experiences in Music,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (July 23, 2014),.

¹⁴⁵ As Istvan Molnar-Szakacs described of one experiment about this phenomenon, “powerful affective responses that can be provoked by apparently abstract musical sounds are supported by this human mirror neuron system, which may subserve similar computations during the processing of music, action and linguistic information.” Istvan Molnar-Szakacs and Katie Overy, “Music and Mirror Neurons: From Motion to 'e'motion,” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 1, no. 3 (December 2006): 235–41.

¹⁴⁶ Kingsbury, *Music Talent & Performance*, 98.

¹⁴⁷ For further discussion of this stereotypical understanding, see Mari Yoshihara, *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music* (Temple University Press, 2008); Deborah Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (Routledge, 2004); Grace Wang, *Soundtracks of Asian America: Navigating Race through Musical Performance* (Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁴⁸ Yoshihara, *Musicians from a Different Shore*, 43.

stating that “The Suzuki Method basically develops technique by way of massive amounts of repetition [...] that has spawned the least creative 50-year era in violin history.”¹⁴⁹

Indeed, music itself (and not simply musical talent) is often understood according to its ability to affect a listener’s experience, especially in the context of Western art music culture.

Another way of considering this meaning, therefore, is that a performer’s talent is present when she is able to allow the music to do what it is meant to do. This understanding can apply to the more European classical ideal that sees the performer more as a conduit that accurately transmits the intentions of the composer to the experience of the audience, but in other contexts as well: a Hindustani musician who is able to achieve the desired mindset while improvising, a jazz musician who is able to control her instrument “so well that the conduit from concept to execution seems almost direct,” as Travis Jackson has discussed.¹⁵⁰ The difference between witnessing a performer unable to navigate her instrument and a performer able to seemingly transcend the technical and bodily difficulties of musical performance, according to this meaning, is the difference between an untalented performer and an talented one.

5. *Speed*

I placed him at the other end of the room, and as I struck the piano at random, he *immediately* told every note I struck, whether black or white. He does not know their names. I struck very quickly, giving him no time to think, and kept him saying black and white as fast as he could speak; he never missed once.¹⁵¹

Dwight’s Journal of Music, 1861

Sarah, who is probably physically the most talented child, and I speak of that as neurologically, she just, I can’t even keep up with her. She immediately connects and she knows the fingerboard and her body so well and so fast and clean.¹⁵²

Ronda Cole, 2014

¹⁴⁹ “Suzuki’s BIGGEST Lie,” accessed September 8, 2017, <http://markoconnorblog.blogspot.com/2014/10/suzukis-biggest-lie.html>.

¹⁵⁰ Travis A. Jackson, *Blowin’ the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene* (University of California Press, 2012), 41.

¹⁵¹ Brown, “Tom,” *Dwight’s Journal of Music* 19 (May 18, 1861): 55.

¹⁵² Interview with Ronda Cole, September 10 2014.

Musical talent is often conceptualized metaphorically within a spatialized terrain—a temporally delimited path of achievement that begins with one’s birth. According to this metaphorical rendering, those who are musically talented are those who learn more quickly or with more ease than their “slower” counterparts, which enables them to “excel,” to surpass others on the path toward exceptional or extraordinary musical achievement. In other words, musical talent simply means quickness of learning. Child prodigies are the most extreme example of such swiftness: by performing at the level of an adult at the age of a young child, they have demonstrated an ability to proceed further along this imagined path of achievement in the fewest number of years, signifying a type of pedagogical momentum (often understood as a type of potential energy).¹⁵³ This is the logic at the foundation of nineteenth-century definitions of idiocy, as well as some contemporary models of special education.¹⁵⁴ Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon conceived their new model for testing students’ intelligence as a measure of “mental age” and whether one was ahead or behind, fast or slow: “Understanding the normal progress of intellectual development among normals, we shall be able to determine how many years such an individual is advanced or retarded.”¹⁵⁵

While speed of learning is an observable quality, the implications of this meaning of talent vary: perhaps talented children merely learn quickly and others eventually are able to catch up (the argument of Shinichi Suzuki, discussed in Chapter 4); perhaps talent is an indication of a life-long

¹⁵³ Nannerl Mozart’s description of her brother offers a formative example of the ways these understandings of speed have been intertwined with discourses of talent, here in the context of Western art music: “The boy at once showed his God-given [and] extraordinary talent [...] It was so easy for this child and for his father that he learned a piece in an hour and a minuet in half an hour, so that he could play it faultlessly and with the greatest delicacy, and keeping exactly in time. The evidence Nannerl presents for Wolfgang’s talent focuses on the speed and ease with which he learned certain pieces (not sloppily, but “faultlessly” and “with delicacy”). As quoted in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Mozart: A Documentary Biography* (Stanford University Press, 1966).

¹⁵⁴ The term “retarded,” for instance, was adopted in the twentieth century to replace terms such as “idiot,” “moron,” and “imbecile,” terms I discuss further in Chapter 2. Retardation directly addressed this idea of developmental or educational rapidity.

¹⁵⁵ Binet and Simon, *The Development of Intelligence in Children*, 41.

quickness of mind and capacity for growth that ensures continuing exceptionalism.¹⁵⁶ The case of child prodigies' speed, however, is one example of the false promise of potential: it is well-known that exceptional child performers often "slow down" in their progress, failing to achieve the possibilities initially envisaged for them. While this slowing occurs for many reasons, Ellen Winner has noted that young prodigies' impressiveness is not generalizable—that audiences are impressed by a particular set of musical skills. As Winner explains, "a prodigy is someone who can easily and rapidly master an already-established domain with expertise," whereas musicians and other artists celebrated later in life need to cultivate an entirely different set of creative and intellectual capabilities to "excel."¹⁵⁷ Indeed, as Chapter 4 interlocutor Pamela Wiley noted, this notion of speed leaves out many variables. "The hare can run fast right away because he's that way, and the tortoise wins the race because he's slow and steady and he wins the race. So which one's more talented?"¹⁵⁸

Dis-Ability

[Blind Tom] has been blind from birth, and it would seem here, as often observed before, that, by a compensative law of our being, in proportion as one sense is defective, the expenditure of vital energy thus saved is absorbed by some other sense.¹⁵⁹

Writer for *The Public Ledger*, 1867

Just how you sing, you were able to take [your anxiety disorder], put it into your voice, and make me feel something.¹⁶⁰

Howie Mandel, *America's Got Talent*, 2014

¹⁵⁶ Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Lisa Limburg-Weber, and Steven Pfeiffer, *Early Gifts: Recognizing and Nurturing Children's Talents* (Prufrock Press Inc., 2003). Many psychologists studying exceptional skills have adopted a definition highly tied to this idea of prodigy, reducing their definition of talent simply to "the rate at which a person learns, not as any sort of innate, fixed quality." See Angela L. Duckworth Scott Barry Kaufman, "World-Class Expertise: A Developmental Model," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, 2015, 2.

¹⁵⁷ Ellen Winner, "Child Prodigies and Adult Genius: A Weak Link," in *The Wiley Handbook of Genius* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 297–320.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Pamela Wiley, April 22, 2018.

¹⁵⁹ From *The Public Ledger*, November 27, 1865. In *The Marvelous Musical Prodigy, Blind Tom, the Negro Boy Pianist* (New York: Tower, Gildersleeve & Co., 1867).

¹⁶⁰ Norman, *America's Got Talent*, "903," (NBC Television, June 10, 2014).

Some conceive talent according to a particular metaphorical physics, something akin to a symbolic equilibrium of abilities. When an individual possesses one extraordinary ability, they are often condemned to suffer a lack in another aspect of their being.¹⁶¹ According to this meaning of talent, great strengths beget great weaknesses—or, alternatively, great weaknesses sometimes beget great strengths. Such a conception of talent and ability as coupled with some type of non-talent and dis-ability applies in more literal and quotidian ways, as well: the time and energy required to specialize in something like musical performance requires the neglect of other areas of experience or expertise; the forced deprivation of some sense or ability often allows an individual to devote their energies (consciously or not) to a more limited and specialized set of abilities. In a reversal and revision of the common idiom, one might say that a master at one particular skill cannot simultaneously be a jack of all the other trades.

This meaning of talent summons the dichotomous German etymology of gift, *das Gift*, mentioned earlier, as a present as well as a poison, a linguistic confirmation that talent can indeed be a blessing and a curse.¹⁶² The meaning has a long genealogy. Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot, for instance, described this paired understanding of a surplus and lack in the case of the extreme example of the genius: “They are only good for one thing, and apart from that, nothing. They don’t know what it means to be citizens, fathers, mothers, brothers, relations, friends.”¹⁶³ In many ways, this conception of talent opposes the archetype of the polymath, the Renaissance man, or in psychological terms, those with multipotentiality.¹⁶⁴ Further, both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3

¹⁶¹ Andrew Solomon, “Would You Wish This On Your Child?,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 4, 2012.: “Genius is an abnormality, and can signal other abnormalities,” says Veda Kaplinsky of Juilliard, perhaps the world’s pre-eminent teacher of young pianists. “Many gifted kids have A.D.D. or O.C.D. or Asperger’s. When the parents are confronted with two sides of a kid, they’re so quick to acknowledge the positive, the talented, the exceptional; they are often in denial over everything else.”

¹⁶² Mauss, *The Gift*.

¹⁶³ Denis Diderot, *Rameau’s Nephew / D’Alembert’s Dream* (Penguin UK, 1976).

¹⁶⁴ Sajjadi et al. comment, however, that even multipotentiality has drawbacks. As they explain, the concept of multipotentiality describes one’s “ability and interest to pursue various activities and goals especially as related to leisure and career choice. Multipotentiality appears beneficial, but can also lead to problems in career decision-making.” See

address the complex tensions between disability and achievement—between conditions and experiences that should slow musicians down, but (seemingly) facilitate their musical development.

The notion of “twice exceptional ability” emerged in educational discourses in the 1990s, following the “gifted-handicapped” category from the 1970s. Researchers have found support for this coupling. Szabolcs Kéri has identified neurological links between psychosis and creative ability, for instance. Another study found that “Studies of creative individuals also indicate that they have a higher rate of mental illness than a noncreative comparison group, as well as a higher rate of both creativity and mental illness in their first-degree relatives.”¹⁶⁵ Malcolm Gladwell has described this phenomenon as a “desirable difficulty,” citing the Biblical narrative of David and Goliath and suggesting that, to offer one example in which he also summons the metaphor of the gift, certain people with dyslexia may reap benefits from their disability: “If you take away the gift of reading, you create the gift of listening.”¹⁶⁶ This conception of talent, of course, is often used to perpetuate a medley of falsehoods about the nature of numerous disabilities. As Chapter 3 explores further, the notion that those with impairments or disabilities must possess a compensatory extraordinary ability sidesteps the very real systemic disadvantages those with disabilities are forced to navigate.¹⁶⁷ This notion of “supercrips” as superhuman, or as “inspiration porn” for normal onlookers, has been widely critiqued and analyzed.¹⁶⁸ As Jan Grue has summarized, “a defining feature of supercrip

Seyed Hossein Sajjadi, F. Gillian Rejskind, and Bruce M. Shore, “Is Multipotentiality a Problem or Not? A New Look at the Data,” *High Ability Studies* 12, no. 1 (June 1, 2001): 27–43.

¹⁶⁵ It is important to note that this statement only describes correlation, though it points to perceptions of causality. N. C. Andreasen, “Creativity and Mental Illness: Prevalence Rates in Writers and Their First-Degree Relatives,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 144, no. 10 (October 1987): 1288–92.

¹⁶⁶ Peter Sergo, “Experts Criticize Scientific Basis of Malcolm Gladwell’s Dyslexia Argument,” *Medical Daily*, October 29, 2013, <https://www.medicaldaily.com/malcolm-gladwells-david-and-goliath-experts-criticize-scientific-basis-his-dyslexia-argument-261257>.

¹⁶⁷ For a helpful theorization of the narrative figure of the supercrip, see Sami Schalk, “Reevaluating the Supercrip,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 10, no. 1 (February 24, 2016): 71–86.

¹⁶⁸ For instance, see Ronald J. Berger, “Disability and the Dedicated Wheelchair Athlete: Beyond the ‘Supercrip’ Critique,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 37, no. 6 (December 1, 2008): 647–78; Jan Grue, “The Problem of the Supercrip: Representation and Misrepresentation of Ability,” in *Disability Research Today: International Perspectives* (Routledge, 2015).

narratives is their rationalization and legitimization of impairments as positive attributes. This happens when they are represented as causes of achievement and transformative experience.”¹⁶⁹

The example of Ludwig van Beethoven looms as an archetypical supercrip narrative in Western art music contexts. As he described his increasing struggle with his hearing loss, “You will realize what a sad life I must now lead, seeing that I am cut off from everything that is dear and precious to me...I must withdraw from everything; and my best years will rapidly pass away without my being able to achieve all that my talent and my strength have commanded me to do.”¹⁷⁰ William Kinderman has observed that despite the fears Beethoven expressed above, “his art actually became richer as his hearing declined. [...] The parallel between Beethoven’s stylistic development and his increasing deafness is more than coincidental, and it has not escaped notice.”¹⁷¹

While the experiences of disability and exceptionalism have historically been understood as associated, *theories* around dis-ability apply productively to the case exceptional abilities, as well. One of the founding claims of disability studies scholars separates out disability as a socially contingent condition the larger social context, and impairment as solely a biological one.¹⁷² And so, I have argued, with talent: in some cultures, an ability like perfect pitch (the biological bases of which, it should be noted, is still contested) would barely be acknowledged, let alone rewarded or seen as an indication of other musical aptitudes.¹⁷³ In the American context of violin pedagogy examined in Chapter 4, however, students with perfect pitch are often perceived as gifted and are in turn given more concerted training and opportunities for further growth.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, students with long fingers

¹⁶⁹ Grue, “The Problem of the Supercrip: Representation and Misrepresentation of Ability.”

¹⁷⁰ Kinderman, *Beethoven*.

¹⁷¹ Kinderman.

¹⁷² Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury, *Handbook of Disability Studies* (SAGE, 2001).

¹⁷³ Robert J. Zatorre, “Absolute Pitch: A Model for Understanding the Influence of Genes and Development on Neural and Cognitive Function,” *Nature Neuroscience* 6, no. 7 (July 2003): 692–95.

¹⁷⁴ Stephen C. Hedger, Shannon L. M. Heald, and Howard C. Nusbaum, “Absolute Pitch May Not Be So Absolute,” *Psychological Science* 24, no. 8 (August 1, 2013): 1496–1502.

who may be seen as disproportionate in one context become “naturally inclined” when they are considered for piano lessons.

Importantly, the concepts of multipotentiality and twice exceptional ability acknowledge a multiplicity of arenas in which one may be abled or dis-abled. This conception contrasts, for instance, with both meanings represented in Table 1.2, which portray the quality of giftedness as monolithic—one is either placed in the gifted class or not (regardless of whether giftedness is a relative or binary construct). Scholars have increasingly challenged this notion of talent as a unified quality, from Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences to more recent scholarship that further problematizes and extends Gardner’s notion to more learning-based and mutable modes of categorization.¹⁷⁵

Discourses of Talent

This chapter has explored ten distinct meanings that have been ascribed to musical talent—ten ways that the concept has been employed in meaning-making processes. But what exactly does this typology accomplish? Does it contain existing potentiality to help scholars and educators re-evaluate their use of language and their modes of evaluating musical ability? Is it a gift accompanied by some expectation of scholarly “reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt”?¹⁷⁶ Does it help accelerate scholarly knowledge about musical talent? Metacommentary aside, its most straightforward contribution is just that: it acts as a heuristic device to help readers interrogate their own and others’ assumptions about musical ability, to analyze the language that pervades musical

¹⁷⁵ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Basic Books, 1993); Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (Random House Publishing Group, 2012); Francoys Gagne, “A Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent. Year 2000 Update,” 2000.

¹⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

discourses, and to lend a more critical eye to the ways that the floating signifier is employed consciously, but more often unconsciously, as a hegemonic tool.¹⁷⁷

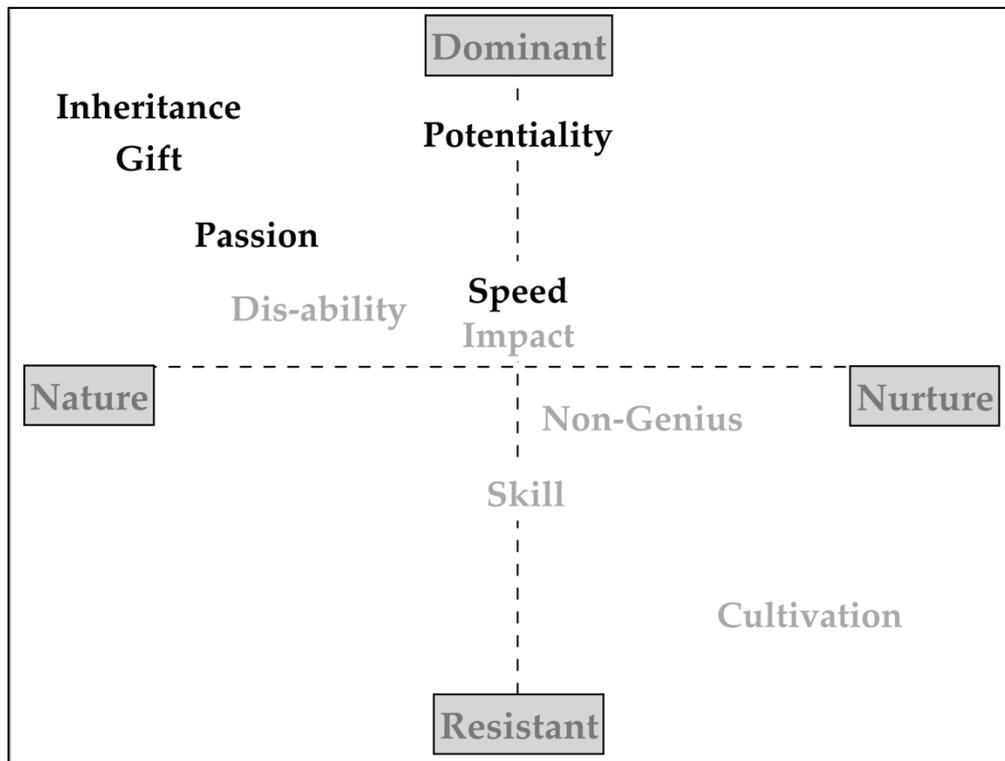


Figure 1.2: A two-dimensional map of talent's meanings. Image by author.

Figure 1.2 offers one way these meanings might be mapped onto a two-dimensional typological grid. This representation emphasizes the fact that the five core meanings of talent explored here are also the most naturalizing ones. Further, it provides a visual map to supplement the discussions in the following case studies, which trace the multiple ways these alternative meanings are employed in discursive struggle.

As I noted at the start of the chapter, these meanings have neither been ubiquitous nor exclusive to any particular American musical discourse. Musical “giftedness,” for example, is not the

¹⁷⁷ Conceptual typologies have taken many forms and have been used for a variety of projects. For an outline of the ways conceptual typologies have been constructed, utilized, and visualized, see David Collier, Jody LaPorte, and Jason Seawright, “Putting Typologies to Work: Concept Formation, Measurement, and Analytic Rigor,” *Political Research Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (March 2012): 217–32.

sole discursive domain of public school programs, and further, giftedness is defined differently within specific educational and scholarly communities. Over the course of the past two centuries, the typology's ten meanings have circulated within and between discourses—of particular social groups, particular scholarly traditions, particular professional communities.¹⁷⁸ In the three case studies that follow, various combinations of these ten meanings enter into discursive struggle. Chapter 2 centers on a different set of tensions that highlight shifting racialized understandings around musical ability development, but the types discussed here pervade the late nineteenth-century discourses examined there. Chapter 3 more closely examines the binary nature of mainstream discourses of talent, the role of disability as a narrative prosthesis for musical ability, and the ways a performer's affective and emotional impact is portrayed on these reality television programs as synonymous with musical talent. Chapter 4 examines the ways these types of meanings come into conflict in pedagogical encounters—how the beliefs of teachers, parents, and students directly impacts the type of musical skills a student is able to cultivate.

¹⁷⁸ For a summary of the educational debates over the meaning of giftedness, see Jeffrey P. Bakken, Festus E. Obiakor, and Anthony F. Rotatori, *Gifted Education: Current Perspectives and Issues* (Emerald Group Publishing, 2014), 129. As I discussed in the introduction, the “discourses” I refer to here are what James Gee has called “big D” discourses (though I do not capitalize the word here), also known as discourse systems: particular ways of representing certain parts or aspects of the physical, social, or psychological world.

II. Explaining Talent: The Career of Thomas Wiggins

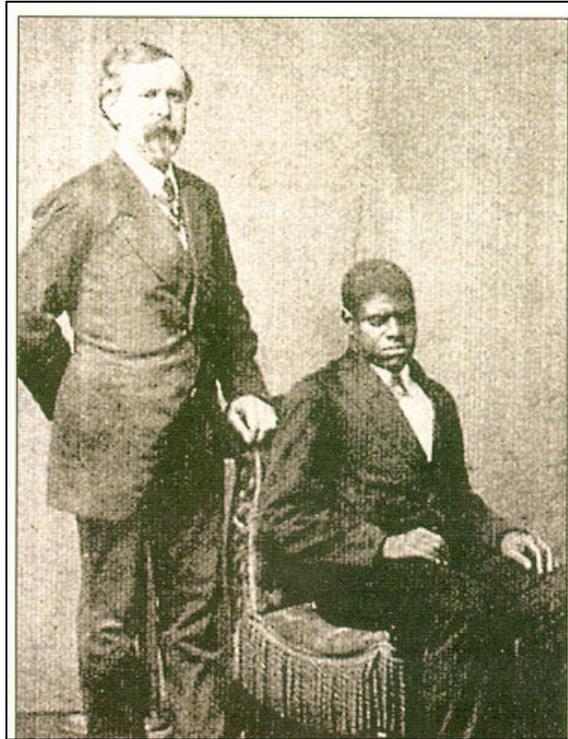


Figure 2.1: General Bethune and Blind Tom. Image from twainquotes.com.¹

Introduction

On June 14, 1908, one of the most debated musicians of the nineteenth century passed away in Hoboken, New Jersey. His name was Thomas Wiggins, though millions had come to know him as “Blind Tom.” Wiggins’ death added further unresolvable questions to the debate. “What was he? Whence came he?” asked newspaper editor Henry Watterson in an obituary.² “Blind, deformed, and black—as black even as Erebus—idiocy, the idiocy of a mysterious, perpetual frenzy, the sole companion of his waking visions and his dreams—whence came he, and was he, and wherefore?”³

¹ Barbara Schmidt, “Biography of Thomas Bethune Also Known as Thomas Wiggins - Blind Tom,” accessed May 24, 2018, <http://www.twainquotes.com/archangels.html>.

² Henry Watterson, “Blind Tom,” *Courier-Journal*, June 16, 1908.

³ Watterson.

In the weeks following Wiggins' death, scores of obituaries like Watterson's rehearsed versions of the story of the musician's life. "As a little boy he showed marvelous ability to imitate all sounds."⁴ "By night he would steal into the house of his master to imitate in undertones on the piano the pieces he had heard others play during the day."⁵ "His technique came as naturally as did his musical emotions."⁶

The end of Watterson's obituary proclaims that Wiggins' musical soul, "imprisoned, chained," would go on to "join the Choir Invisible for ever and for ever," invoking George Eliot's words: "O may I join the choir invisible / Of those immortal dead who live again."⁷ The reference was doubly apropos: although Wiggins' legacy would undoubtedly live on in American musical memory, he had more literally joined the ranks of "those immortal dead who live again" in recent decades, or so many news outlets had made it seem. Indeed, a nearly constant stream of false death reports had flowed from coverage of Wiggins' life, serving as a conspicuous example of the way such discourses chronically blurred fact and fiction, shaped more by the desires and fantasies of befuddled onlookers than the pianist's lived realities.⁸ In 1871, one paper reported that the performer, then 22 years old, had passed away from consumption.⁹ In 1889, so many people believed the pianist had perished in a Pennsylvania flood that local authorities erected a tombstone

⁴ Special Dispatch to the Chronicle., "Famous Negro Pianist Dead: 'Blind Tom,' Sensation of Two Continents, Passes Away," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 15, 1908.

⁵ "BLIND TOM'S LIFE ENDS: Negro Musical Prodigy Dies in Hoboken--Was Born in Slavery," *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*, June 15, 1908.

⁶ "Blind Tom, Pianist, Dies of a Stroke: Old Negro with Strange Mastery of Music Ends His Days in Hoboken," *The New York Times*, June 15, 1908.

⁷ George Eliot, *O May I Join the Choir Invisible!* (D. Lothrop, 1884).

⁸ "Consumption" generally referred to Tuberculosis. On a different note, in a recent talk entitled "His Music Was Not a Weapon" that built upon studies by J. P. Wilson and others, Will Cheng has discussed the effects of the racial empathy gap in conjunction with formidability bias, arguing that although black bodies have been forced to withstand inconceivable amounts of violence, this fact does not mean that they are somehow impervious to it, that they are endowed with some type of superpower—but this is exactly what psychological studies reveal white onlookers as thinking. See John Paul Wilson, Kurt Hugenberg, and Nicholas O. Rule, "Racial Bias in Judgments of Physical Size and Formidability: From Size to Threat," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 1 (July 2017): 59–80.

⁹ Geneva Handy Southall, *Blind Tom, the Black Pianist-Composer (1849-1908): Continually Enslaved* (Scarecrow Press, 2002), 137.

that stood for decades as an emblem of continued uncertainty.¹⁰ In 1891, the Indianapolis *Freeman* reported that Blind Tom was dying in a New York insane asylum; another publication added that physicians were preparing to dissect and examine his brain.¹¹ In 1903, a paper reported that he had leaped from the Eads Bridge in St. Louis because he “heard the murmuring waters below and could not resist the temptation to get nearer to their music.”¹² These recurring death reports serve as evidence that spectators were eager to resolve and repudiate the epistemological disconcertion that the composer-pianist’s subjectivity provoked during the years immediately following the Civil War.

Even after Wiggins’ most undeniable demise in 1908, “Blind Tom,” the stage persona invented by the pianist’s profit-mongering managers continued to live on, his memorable talent rendered immortal, simultaneously serving as a spectacle of inexplicable musical ability and a spectre that fueled already-heightened white racial anxieties around black musicality. For years after Wiggins’ death, pianists claiming to be Blind Tom appeared on vaudeville stages across the country, performing their own personal fantasies of the pianist’s idiosyncratic mixture of racialized eccentricities and virtuosic musical ability.¹³ Articles further scrutinizing the pianist’s astonishing life regularly appeared in newspapers and periodicals well into the middle of the twentieth century. Even today, scholars continue to search for traces of Thomas Wiggins’ lived experiences in a historical archive saturated with hyperbolic, sensationalist, and entirely fictional depictions of the “Marvelous Musical Prodigy.” Given this largely silenced past, it has been the aim of numerous scholars to “right the historical wrongs” of Wiggins’ remarkable story, as Wiggins’ most extensive biographer Geneva Handy Southall put it.¹⁴

¹⁰ Deirdre O’Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom* (Overlook Duckworth, 2009).

¹¹ “Blind Tom,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 26, 1891.

¹² “Blind Tom at the Orpheum,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 29, 1903.

¹³ O’Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*.

¹⁴ Southall, *Blind Tom, the Black Pianist-Composer (1849-1908)*. This historical revisiting and revision that Southall and others have undergone is indeed reminiscent of Trouillot’s configuration of “unearthing the silences” that result in transforming narratives.

This chapter, however, does not aim to “right the historical wrongs” of the Wiggins narrative, as studies like Southall’s have so carefully done. Rather, I seek to write *about* these historical wrongs—to examine the exceptionally rich and oft-conflicting discourses about the pianist as evidence of larger ideological debates about the development and nature of musical ability at this time. The voices of critics, scholars, and other contemporaries of Wiggins serve as the chapter’s central data.¹⁵ I have analyzed texts from various newspapers, pamphlets, journal articles, and other primary sources published in the United States and abroad. In interpreting these data, I have drawn upon a variety of discourse-analytical frameworks, building the chapter’s discussion upon these frameworks’ shared insight that dominant classes within society employ discursive processes to naturalize and ideologically validate unequal distributions of power and capital.¹⁶ One might understand affirmations or qualifications of Wiggins’ “talent” as assertions about which musical skills and musical bodies should be granted power—and which should not. The concept of “musical talent” served as an ideological tool during the socially tumultuous years following the Civil War, when control over cultural production was a key element in establishing a revised hegemonic system that asserted what was “normal” and which groups were naturally superior—intellectually, musically, or otherwise.¹⁷

In this chapter, I argue that Blind Tom was not merely “talented” in the face of his unpropitious circumstances (as previous scholars have claimed), but in relation to them. In other words, the famous prodigy was not transformed from a blind slave boy without evident use value to

¹⁵ While I am focusing here primarily on receptions of Wiggins within mainstream European American discourses, he also played an important role within African American uplift narratives.

¹⁶ This notion of discourse acknowledges that it operates on several levels, necessitating analysis of the texts themselves, the social function of those texts as they are produced and received, and on a more Foucauldian register, the link between those texts and the production of knowledge. When referring to “discourse” here, I mean to include instances of verbal, written, or musical expression and communication—as James Gee put it, ways “of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting”—that both shape and are shaped by the social realities of participants. Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, “The Rediscovery of Ideology: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 1982, 111–41.

a highly commodified entertainer because of an innate pianistic talent that broke through the shackles of his inhibiting circumstances. Rather, the specific musical feats that Wiggins performed—from his first encounter with his master’s piano to the highly rehearsed demonstrations of musical skill he displayed to audiences—were historically situated, imagined, and subsequently invented (and shrewdly cultivated by his masters and managers) in relation to coeval conceptions of musical talent, giftedness, potential, and genius.¹⁸ Moreover, I assert that the diverse discursive struggles about Thomas Wiggins provide a vivid window into evolving understandings of “musical talent” at a formative moment in the history of the concept, which is intimately connected with long-standing white American mythologies and curiosities around black musicality. In short, the tensions that emerged in the discourses about Wiggins’ unexpected musical expertise reveal tensions in general understandings of exceptional musical ability.

Perhaps more than any other quality, Thomas Wiggins’ musical career was defined by contradiction. From his first performances as a young boy, audiences struggled to characterize and categorize the cognitive dissonance he elicited as much as the musical dissonance he often produced; as Joseph Straus summarized, “virtually all contemporary descriptions stress the incongruity of the spectacle.”¹⁹ During his performances, onlookers often described witnessing a preternatural transformation when he sat at the piano—what Ronald Radano dubbed “an inversion of Robert Louis Stephenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.”²⁰ The assortment of reactions to Wiggins were just as incongruous: he was celebrated by some and abhorred by others; some sources claimed that he was proof of the artistic and intellectual possibilities of his race, while others denounced him as a fraud and a freak. Overall, the literature on Wiggins encompasses a wildly antithetical set of signifiers—

¹⁸ Regarding Wiggins’ use value, he was famously included for free as an infant when the Bethunes purchased his mother, Charity Green, as everyone expected the blind child to be useless as a laborer.

¹⁹ Joseph Straus, “Idiots Savants, Retarded Savants, Talented Aments, Mono-Savants, Autistic Savants, Just Plain Savants, People with Savant Syndrome, and Autistic People Who Are Good at Things: A View from Disability Studies,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (June 4, 2014), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3407>.

²⁰ Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 176.

idiotic, genius, monstrous, mechanistic, gifted, possessed, sophisticated, primitive, marvelous, magical, uncanny. While Southall rightly described the body of writing about the pianist as a “literary medley of misinformation,” few have addressed why and how such a distinctive medley developed and flourished.²¹ Indeed, considering the historical moment and the audiences for which Wiggins performed, negative reactions to his achievements and denials of his musical abilities are perhaps more explicable than the many enthusiastic affirmations of his genius.²² Through analyzing five of the most conspicuous tensions that framed discourses around the famous pianist, this chapter illustrates how shifting understandings about the development of musical talent were fundamentally implicated in these contradictory discourses.

As elsewhere in the dissertation, my use of the term “talent” assumes its status as a floating signifier: a signifier with relational and variable meanings that itself is necessarily more stable as a word than the collection of concepts and referents associated with it. In engaging with “talent” itself, I aim to foreground its role and power as a signifier without reifying its historically and culturally contingent meanings. As Stuart Hall remarked about the similar problem of discussing race, “I’m really talking in part about that great untidy, dirty world in which race matters, outside of the Academy as well as what light we may throw on it from inside.”²³ So, too, with talent, which is surrounded by a constellation of potential meanings that claim something about the process of ability development.

I intentionally refer both to “Thomas Wiggins” and “Blind Tom” in the course of the chapter. Rather than employing these appellations as analogues, I hope to gesture toward the two

²¹ Geneva Southall, “Blind Tom: A Misrepresented and Neglected Composer-Pianist,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 3, no. 2 (1975): 141.

²² As Radano noted, one of the most curious elements of the reception of Wiggins was why “so many white observers actually desired to claim for Tom such remarkable gifts.” Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 176.

²³ Sut Jhally, Stuart Hall, and Media Education Foundation, *Race: The Floating Signifier* (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997).

meaningfully different lives of the pianist/composer mentioned above: the one that he himself lived and experienced, and the one that was invented, elaborated, ornamented, projected, or entirely imagined by others. The persona of Blind Tom was necessarily as multivalent as it was phantasmal. Like talent itself, Blind Tom floats as a signifier in the following discussions, forwarding and serving a variety of talent-oriented agendas.

The following pages comprise five main sections, each of which brings one of these ideological tensions or contradictions into focus: discovery/invention, gift/commodity, mind/body, child/prodigy, and magic/illusion. These groupings emerged from my analysis of the body of discourse about Thomas Wiggins; they also serve as meaningful heuristics for nineteenth-century debates about musical ability more broadly: were there different categories or degrees of musical ability? What forces were responsible for exceptional musicality: education, heredity, a stochastic bestowal of aptitude, a supernatural power with some agenda in mind? As with the interconnected discursive types of talent analyzed in the previous chapter's typology, each of the following sections parses one dimension of my central argument around Wiggins' evocation and provocation of nineteenth-century conceptions of musicality. Rather than covering mutually exclusive thematic areas, these sections are intended to spiral over the discursive terrain from different theoretical vantage points, focusing on different interpretational agendas.

Discovery / Invention

How His Talent Was Discovered. When he was 4 years old, the same age at which the infant Mozart was discovered at the piano during the night, little Tom was heard one day at the piano, picking out with his chubby fingers the notes of the melodies he had heard played on the piano. General Bethune soon recognized the talent of the child.²⁴

An essential element of the myth of Blind Tom was the surprising "discovery" of his innate

²⁴ "The Remarkable Case of the Late 'Blind Tom': How an Imbecile Blind Negro Pianist Amazed Scientists and Musicians the World Over," *The Etude* 26, no. 8 (August 1908): 532.

talent—a figure of speech and thought that dominated discourses of musicality during that period, as the reference to young Mozart above suggests.²⁵ Here, I argue that Thomas Wiggins’ musical talent, like the stage persona of Blind Tom, was more invention than discovery. While acknowledging and examining the particularly unique individual differences that contributed to Wiggins’ extraordinary and historically momentous musical achievements, I assert that important ideological work was done by the promulgation of the notion that his talent, like all talent, was “discovered.”²⁶

The invention of Blind Tom’s talent was necessarily both societal and individual, general and specific: for a blind, “idiotic” slave boy to radically and profitably be presented as a magical, innately gifted prodigy with an unexpectedly musical soul (to summon the subsequent themes of this chapter), talent as a concept needed already to have been invented and imbued with these archetypal features, as I argued in Chapter 1. By Wiggins’ lifetime, these conceptions of talent were already in broad circulation; they erased and naturalized the social mechanisms that directed flows of capital, separating, for example, the musical “potentialities” of those deemed “pickaninnies” from the ones associated with those deemed prodigies. On top of the foundation of this broader discursive invention, however, the specific narrative around discovering Blind Tom’s talent was carefully and more purposively assembled by his masters, managers, and others complicit in his musical cultivation, marketing, and selective silencing.

²⁵ As Lakoff has discussed, figures of speech are also, powerfully, figures of thought, which cause us to comprehend and reason according to the structure of the metaphors used. Therefore, societal knowledge about the process of discovery is mapped onto the process of ability development. Lakoff, “A Figure of Thought,” 359.

²⁶ While I take the term “individual differences” from psychology, it is important to note that this idea, which also dates back to the late 1800s, has been used to naturalize the types of socially constructed categories being interrogated here. As Straus reminds us about disability (a line of reasoning which, as I have noted previously, applies to musical abilities as well), “Like gender, disability has a self-evident physical, biological basis: blindness, deafness, paraplegia, and Down syndrome, for example, are objective, factual matters. But, also like gender, the physical, biological facts of disability are endowed with meaning by the elaborate interpretive networks created within particular societies and cultures.” While it is undeniable that Wiggins’ (probable) autism and blindness were what Straus has called “objective, factual matters,” I am interested here in the constellation of other traits that intersected with these aspects of his identity that were markedly less “factual.” Joseph N. Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

The excerpt that opens this section is one example of copious descriptions of Blind Tom that reference the archetypes of Mozartian natural talent. By the time of Blind Tom's death, such avowals of discovery had transformed into a common refrain in discourses about the black pianist's musical abilities. At the heart of this understanding of "Blind Tom's" musicality is the notion that it was always already there, "discovered," "revealed," "recognized," or even "accidentally found out."²⁷ Indeed, discovery itself was one of the most notable conceptual innovations of the "Age of Discovery" that produced both Mozart and the notion of his musical genius. As a concept, discovery dominated epistemological repertoires of nineteenth century Americans, as well. 1849, for instance, was not only the year that Wiggins was born, but the year that gold was first discovered in California and miners hoping to profit from this discovery of America's geological gift flocked from across the globe. In short, the discovery of natural resources—whether physical gold, like the original Biblical "talents" discussed in the previous chapter, or any number of more figurative variations—were in the national zeitgeist around the beginning of Wiggins' life.

This project is not alone in asserting that "discoveries" were themselves inventions in some sense, but it is important to understand the ideological work such claims of discovery have accomplished in Thomas Wiggins' case.²⁸ Processes labeled as discoveries—Christopher Columbus's discovery of America, J. J. Thompson's discovery of the electron, a child's discovery of her sexual orientation—are not created equal, but rather naturalize different categories of objects and concepts, operating according to different discursive logics and political agendas. In all cases, however, "discoveries" are avowals that some aspect of the natural world simply needed to be recognized, identified, named. Conversely, assertions of invention are assertions not only about the fact of

²⁷ "Blind Tom Bethune: The Death of His Old Master Recalls the Prodigy," *The Washington Post*, February 14, 1895; "The Remarkable Case of the Late 'Blind Tom': How an Imbecile Blind Negro Pianist Amazed Scientists and Musicians the World Over," *The Etude* 26, no. 8 (August 1908): 532; "A Black Prodigy in the Musical World: From the Baltimore Patriot," *Chicago Press and Tribune*, February 7, 1860, sec. page 2.

²⁸ As J.D. Fleming commented in the context of early-modern scholarship, "invention, as opposed to discovery, is now the academic leitmotif." James Dougal Fleming, *The Invention of Discovery, 1500–1700* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013), 1.

creation or fabrication, but about motivation. Wiggins' cast of curators possessed very particular agendas in perpetuating narratives of discovery around his musical abilities. Just as importantly, these narratives amplified a broader moment of cultural invention around the acquisition of musical abilities and the musical implications of racial difference.

What exactly do we know now about Blind Tom's abilities and the way they developed? The past decades have seen a surge of scholarship excavating Wiggins' contradictory story and solidifying his significance in American music history. Much of this work has come from scholars in (music) disability studies, who have sought to situate historically the receptions and treatments of Wiggins' *disabilities*—a complementary task to our present investigation of his abilities. Despite the speculative nature of such historical diagnoses, scholars and specialists have reached a general consensus that Wiggins' "eccentric" behaviors and unusually intense interests in the sonic world stemmed from a rare combination of early infantile autism, profound visual impairment or near total blindness, and, in relation to these, a particular manifestation of savantism that attracted him to the sonically complex and intriguing piano music he heard emanating from the plantation house from infancy.²⁹ As Joseph Straus reminds us, it is quite common for autistic children and adults to develop a particular interest in something they pursue systematically and intensively. While most of these interests are not particularly valued by their families or society more broadly, "sometimes, these special skills fall into an acknowledged area of general cultural interest (like music or art) and are pursued at a sufficiently high level as to attract general notice, and thus invite the savant label."³⁰ The potential distance between Wiggins' classification as a remarkable "idiot savant" and an

²⁹ Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, "Finding Autism in the Compositions of a 19th Century Prodigy: Reconsidering 'Blind Tom' Wiggins," in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music* (Routledge, 2006); M. Grace Baron, *Stress and Coping in Autism* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Terry Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness* (University of Michigan Press, 2009); Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (Pan Macmillan, 2011); Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*.

³⁰ Straus, "Idiot Savants, Retarded Savants, Talented Aments, Mono-Savants, Autistic Savants, Just Plain Savants, People with Savant Syndrome, and Autistic People Who Are Good at Things."

unremarkable “idiot,” to use the term contemporaries often used to describe him, was not vast. Rather than counting objects, collecting facts, or pursuing any number of other interests or fixations, Wiggins’ energies were directed—incidentally, and later, purposely by his managers—toward the piano, a pursuit that radiated cultural symbolism and historical associations with concepts like genius and talent.³¹

Scholars of disability studies have also located Wiggins’ lack of sight as a site of invention.³² While the young boy’s echolalia (sensitivity to sound) was undoubtedly affected by a blindness-related neural reorganization that enhanced his ability to process aural stimuli, the idea and spectacle of the pianist’s blindness also likely played into existing mythologies around musical inspiration and artistic “vision.” As Rowden has noted, by Wiggins’ lifetime, blindness had become a powerful cultural site (rather than an incidental characteristic) that both enabled his subjugation and further mystified his abilities. His lack of sight provided another convenient opportunity for his managers to craft his public persona, as well.³³ Rather than socializing the pianist into behaviors seldom learned without the advantage of sight—like the expected modes of comportment at a dining table—he was allowed to act in ways that supported their portrayal of him as a freak whose sole shred of humanity was his inexplicable musical gift.³⁴

Recent scholarship has also explored Wiggins’ complex position as an enslaved *black musician* whose career spanned the era that Rayford Logan dubbed the “nadir of American race relations,” taking his musical expressions and their reception as evidence of the racial politics that circumscribed his life.³⁵ Stephen M. Best interpreted Blind Tom’s career as a particularly revealing

³¹ For a helpful discussion about special interests and fixations associated with Autistic Spectrum Disorders, see Susan Dodd, *Understanding Autism* (Elsevier Australia, 2005).

³² While Wiggins is commonly described as “blind,” there is evidence that he was able to detect shapes and movements.

³³ Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk*.

³⁴ For one example of this cultivated freakishness, see this article devoted entirely to describing Wiggins’ eating habits, which portrays him as “a wild animal born piano-crazy”: “How Blind Tom Eats,” *The Youth’s Companion*, December 7, 1876.

³⁵ Rayford Whittingham Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (Collier Books, 1972).

discursive nexus: material and spiritual possession, intellectual property, black personhood, and sound.³⁶ Importantly, Daphne Brooks extended conversations about Wiggins to consider his own agency and participation in the construction of his persona and his musical voice, arguing that reading Wiggins' compositions as sonic evidence of his experiences "enables us to consider the black captive's agency as a recorder—and not just the object that is recorded by others."³⁷ Overall, recent work from scholars like Best and Brooks has contributed to a richer and more nuanced understanding of Wiggins' experiences and cultural significance. But while this scholarship has engaged somewhat with the fact of his musical ability, many questions remain regarding the relationship between understandings of his musical abilities and shifting discourses of race, disability, and education.

The detailed archival work of several scholars in particular has corrected some of the conflicting reports and filled the biographical gaps in nineteenth-century sources. Most notably, in 1983, the musician, activist, and black studies scholar Geneva Handy Southall published the first of three books on Wiggins—the first major biographical study on the pianist beyond the journalistic accounts published during and soon after Wiggins' lifetime.³⁸ Southall's careful examination of hundreds of primary sources launched a renewal of interest in Wiggins, whose story had faded despite his status as one of the most famous African American musicians of the nineteenth century. A second biographical study by historian Deidre O'Connell in 2009 engaged with an extended range of primary sources, supplementing Southall's narrative with broader historical context in an effort to add vividness and detail to the social world in which the pianist lived. O'Connell, too, noted the plurality of conflicting accounts about Wiggins' musical abilities, which she traced to publicity efforts

³⁶ Stephen M. Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

³⁷ Daphne A. Brooks, "Puzzling the Intervals": Blind Tom and the Poetics of the Sonic Slave Narrative," *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, 2014.

³⁸ Her first article on Wiggins, however, was published in 1975. Southall, "Blind Tom."

on the part of the pianist's masters and managers. As she noted, "Tom's lust for the piano was matched by his management's urge to mythologize a single watershed moment: the star-spangled moment the prodigy was born!"³⁹ In her efforts to bring historically informed vividness to Wiggins' story, however, O'Connell's poetic license around the subject of Blind Tom's musical talent occasionally reads like a modern iteration of the type of magical thinking that governed historical myths around the "discovery" of Blind Tom's musical "powers."

Although I have briefly described Wiggins death and the scholarly resurrection of his story, let us return to the beginning of Wiggins' life with an eye toward the invention of his specific musical abilities and the ways they were presented to the public. Thomas Wiggins was born in 1849 to slaves Charity Greene and Mingo Wiggins; the family was bought soon thereafter by James M. Bethune, who had a small plantation outside of Columbus, Georgia.⁴⁰ The boy's sensitivity to sounds immediately became apparent to his parents, who had to physically restrain him from chasing the source of sonorities that interested him, whether they were beyond the boundaries of the plantation property or inside the master's house.⁴¹ This house was not only the dwelling place of Bethune, his wife, and their seven children, but also, as of 1853, a new piano on which the women of the household regularly practiced.⁴² Some series of events, variations of which are elaborated below, led to the eight year-old becoming known as, "The Great Star of the Musical World, and the Prodigy of the Age" by October of 1857 (see Figure 2.2).⁴³

³⁹ O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*.

⁴⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 451.

⁴¹ O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 34.

⁴² O'Connell, 43.

⁴³ Atlanta Daily Intelligencer, October 20, 1857.

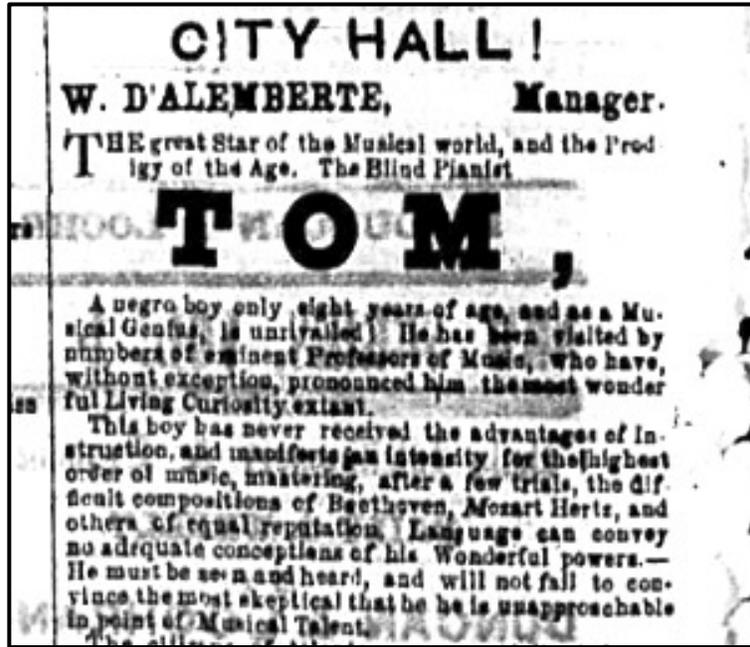


Figure 2.2: Early advertisement for Wiggins' performance in the *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer*, October 20, 1857.

Over the course of Wiggins' career, these early moments became a sort of discursive black box—a site for onlookers to project their imaginations and explanations, further elaborating upon his curators' fictionalized description of the apocryphal moment, which they shared with audiences before every performance. Reviewers, journalists, and other onlookers elaborated further. Perhaps he “exhibited his wonderful musical powers before he was two years old” by singing along with members of the Bethune family.⁴⁴ Or perhaps, upon hearing the Bethune girls singing, “he could not restrain the tears,” of joy and, after being brought inside, further demonstrated “the budding of his imitative genius” by surprising the family with his ability to perfectly realize a tune on the piano.⁴⁵ Perhaps “He was still a baby, when he roamed away from his parent’s cabin one day and stayed up to the forbidden precincts of the big house yard” at which point the “sleeping chords within him were touched” as “he crawled up the steps and into the parlor and crept to the side of the player.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *The Marvelous Musical Prodigy, Blind Tom*.

⁴⁵ A Sketch of the Life of Thomas Greene Bethune (Blind Tom) (Philadelphia: Ledger Book and Job Printing Establishment, 1865).

⁴⁶ “Blind Tome Bethune: The Death of His Old Master Recalls the Prodigy,” *The Washington Post*, February 14, 1895.

Or, perhaps, he hid in the house while the children were giving a concert:

When they had gone, leaving the room, as they supposed, quite empty, they heard the piano tinkle. They ran back, and there, to their amazement, sat the chubby little black monkey on the stool, banging away for dear life, yet not without sequence and rhythm, trying to repeat what they had just been singing and playing.⁴⁷

Regardless of their exact details, these characterizations operate like variations on a theme, betraying their authors' understanding that Wiggins' talent was something revealed, uncovered, or discovered.

It was like something that had hatched, or perhaps it had been awakened by the piano's presence from some type of hibernation. It was always already there. These narratives were not simply elaborating on the actual painstaking and dedicated process of musical training he underwent. Rather, they occupied an epistemological position that was orthogonal to education-oriented understandings of musicality: training was not only unnecessary, but possibly detrimental to the development of his musicality. As an article in the *Chicago Defender* recalled after Wiggins' death, after discourses of innateness had only further solidified in psychological and educational discourses, "no thought was entertained of giving Tom a scientific musical training. Many agree that for Tom this was fortunate, for to have forced a scientific training on him might have interfered with his most unusual gift. But he was allowed free access to the piano."⁴⁸ This "free access" to the piano was not portrayed to be active education, but rather something akin to a pet's free access to a food trough or water bowl: necessary sustenance for natural growth.

Although Blind Tom's origin story became increasingly elaborate as his celebrity grew, even the earliest sources indicate that a particular narrative of discovery was being disseminated to (and by) onlookers. By the time of the 1857 advertisement in Figure 2.2, he was already being presented as a "prodigy" and "musical genius" who had "never received the advantages of instruction."⁴⁹ Such

⁴⁷ Watterson, "Blind Tom."

⁴⁸ Charles T. Magill, "Blind Tom, Unsolved Problem in Musical History," *Chicago Defender*, August 19, 1922.

⁴⁹ "The Great Star of the Musical World, and the Prodigy of the Age, Tom," *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer*, October 20, 1857, sec. Amusements.

a transformation from blind baby without value as a physical laborer to a self-taught, music-making commodity required inventive acts on several fronts. In imagining the young boy's sonic behaviors—repeating words of those around him verbatim, singing along with the Bethune sisters from afar, and, sometime after 1853, plucking out his first series of keys on the parlor piano—as a signifier of his “potential” as a concert pianist, the Bethune family was drawing upon preexisting archetypes of eccentric genius and musical precocity, as I'll argue more extensively in subsequent sections.

Behind the curtain, however, Blind Tom's transformation required significant musical exposure and educational opportunities—an aspect of his day-to-day life seldom foregrounded, both in nineteenth-century accounts and in contemporary scholarship about him. As a few sources have indicated, the boy's early education was taken up by Mary Bethune, the eldest daughter and the house's ordinary piano student.⁵⁰ Later on, he received lessons from a series of pianists whom General Bethune quietly hired while marketing the boy as an untaught prodigy, booking the boy's first Columbus concert hall appearance in October of 1857.⁵¹ Around this time, Bethune hired a Savannah-based tobacco planter named Perry Oliver to promote the young performer beyond the local forums in which he had found notable initial success.⁵² Though Wiggins had been granted extensive access to a piano prior to this point, he now entered a new intensive and immersive stage in his career, being forced to play as many as four shows per day.⁵³ It was during Oliver's initial three-year contract with Bethune that Blind Tom became a national phenomenon and discourses

⁵⁰ Not coincidentally, many of these stories were published during the years Bethune was fighting for legal custody of Wiggins and seeking to emphasize his paternal role.

⁵¹ O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 50.

⁵² Southall, *Blind Tom, the Black Pianist-Composer (1849-1908)*, 2. Bethune's wife, Frances, had recently died and left him with their seven children, and so Bethune hired Oliver in order to profit from Wiggins' performances despite not having the time to promote and accompany the slave himself.

⁵³ O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 83.

pondering his seemingly inexplicable natural talents surged.⁵⁴ As this chapter's discussion of magic and illusion will show, Oliver was more inclined to showmanship than Bethune, developing a performance format that elicited fascination in audiences and disseminated discourses of Blind Tom as a freakish prodigy whose talent was suddenly discovered.⁵⁵

It was during these formative first years that an *Atlantic Monthly* article by author Rebecca Harding Davis launched the young pianist's career into the national spotlight. The context of Davis' 1862 story "Blind Tom" says much about its content: the piece was part of a politically oriented series of stories written after Davis signed an agreement to publish her material exclusively in *The Atlantic*.⁵⁶ The majority of these narratives were fictional, portraying the physical and emotional costs of the Civil War on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. One representative story is "John Lamar," which chronicles the complex relationships among a Confederate prisoner of war, his slave, and a Northerner.⁵⁷ As her efforts to portray the humanity and the complexity of oft-denigrated figures inspired an extensive use of poetic license, Davis' articles notoriously blurred the lines between fact and fiction.⁵⁸ Partially based on her growing readership and Wiggins' growing celebrity both in the South and the North—not to mention their concurrence with the height of the Civil War—the story found immediate success; it was reprinted in its entirety in a number of other publications, and quoted, referenced, and hotly disputed in countless others.

In 1864, with Southern slavery facing extinction, Bethune convinced Wiggins' parents to sign a contract that granted him custody of the young performer, initiating what turned into a series of legal battles between various members of the Bethune clan, Wiggins' parents, and the showman

⁵⁴ Among other notable accomplishments in these early years, Wiggins became the first African American to perform in the White House. Baron, *Stress and Coping in Autism*, 101.

⁵⁵ O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 35.

⁵⁶ Rebecca Harding Davis, *Rebecca Harding Davis's Stories of the Civil War Era: Selected Writings from the Borderlands* (University of Georgia Press, 2010).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

Tabbs Gross, sometimes called America's "Black P.T. Barnum."⁵⁹ Bethune won a 1865 lawsuit against Gross, maintaining "ownership" of Wiggins through a type of indentured servitude; upon the pianist's eighteenth birthday, the Bethunes entered a new phase of legal negotiations, ultimately succeeding in having the pianist declared legally insane and being named his legal guardians (and overseers of his finances). Aside from solidifying Wiggins' frequently cited status as "the last legal slave in America" and generating further publicity for Blind Tom, these court cases provided a particularly detailed glimpse into the perceived relationship between the pianist's "sanity," intelligence, and musical abilities. When quizzed about how he developed his musicality, Wiggins variously credited the rain, the wind, and God, failing to mention the teachers who had spent multitudinous hours "feeding" him notes and shaping his approach to musicianship more broadly.⁶⁰ In addition to solidifying perceptions that his musical talent was an innate and isolated quality, these court proceedings further mystified the diverse set of skills required for musical achievements like Wiggins', and they serve as evidence of the era's established ideological distinction between musical abilities and all others.

With the increased scope of his travels and the financial resources from his number of ticket sales, Wiggins' educational opportunities also expanded significantly. Bethune made sure that the "prodigy" was constantly under a pianist's tutelage; each of his many teachers developed their own sets of pedagogical techniques to help the neurologically atypical pianist prepare for his rigorous and specific concert schedule. Pianist W. P. "Pinky" Howard accompanied Wiggins and Bethune on their tours for years, including a multi-month tour of Europe in 1866, working with the young

⁵⁹ The legal battle began because Gross claimed that Bethune had accepted a down payment of \$20,000 from Gross for the purchase of Blind Tom, neither granting him possession of the pianist nor returning his money.

⁶⁰ It is clear that Wiggins had been coached throughout these legal proceedings, both for the purposes of the lawsuit itself, but also to reinforce the narratives around Blind Tom's mysterious abilities and continue to profit from his performances. Barbara Schmidt, "Archangels Unaware: The Story of Thomas Bethune Also Known as Thomas Wiggins Also Known as 'Blind Tom' (1849 - 1908)," accessed May 27, 2018, <http://www.twainquotes.com/archangels.html>.

pianist to develop and hone his famous musical “tricks.”⁶¹ Reviews and articles frequently cited these displays as the most objective evidence of the pianist’s genuine talent.

Mr. Stoddart took a piece for two hands, which Tom had never heard, and while he played the first part Tom carried on the second, without a moment’s hesitation, and then changing places with Mr. S., he played the first without missing a note.⁶²

“Tom will play two tunes and sing a third at the same time, and let the audience choose the keys he shall perform in.”⁶³

“The audience was entertained by his method of sound reading, by which he told the names of articles shown, when spelled on the notes of the piano, and by his phonetic spelling of words pronounced.”⁶⁴

Hundreds of such reports provide accounts of these ludic spectacles that exhibited Wiggins’ absolute pitch and unusually proficient memory; these tricks also demonstrated his teachers’ and managers’ keen awareness of what audience members would see as signifiers of innate talent.

Joseph Poznanski from New York worked with Wiggins over the course of nine years. A article that appeared in the *Tacoma News* in 1898—offering a rare glimpse into Wiggins’ particularities as a pupil—detailed Poznanski’s teaching approach:

When Tom took his seat at the piano, professor Poznanski having again performed the opening bars of the concerto, of course he did not play exactly right on the first trial, and as Tom is very nervous and is morbidly sensitive and cannot bear direct criticism, Poznanski was obliged to use a good deal of delicate diplomacy. [...] “I am surprised,” continued Poznanski, “That you play this passage as you do. If Beethoven were here, he would say: “Why, gracious goodness, that can’t be the great, the celebrated artist, Blind Tom. He would know better than to play this passage in this way—here Poznanski played it as Tom had played it—but he would know that it should be interpreted this way.” Here Poznanski added, “Why, Tom, Beethoven was not satisfied with his own execution of this passage till he had played it 15 times.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ Appiah and Jr, *Africana*.

⁶² “A Black Prodigy in the Musical World: From the Baltimore Patriot.”

⁶³ Mark Twain, “Letter from Mark Twain: Blind Tom and His Performances,” *Daily Alta California*, August 1, 1869.

⁶⁴ “Blind Tom’s Piano Recitals,” *New York Tribune*, September 18, 1877.

⁶⁵ Daniel Ottolengui, “Poor Tom: Inside Facts About the World Famous Colored Musical Prodigy,” *Tacoma News*, October 29, 1898. The *Tacoma News* provides a helpful sample of the type of repertoire he learned note by note from his teachers: “Under Professor Poznanski’s guidance and tuition Tom also learned to execute Thalberg’s fantasy, “Elisire d’Ameore;” “Massantello,” “Don Pasquale” and “Sonnambula;” Liszt’s “Rigoletto,” “Fantasie Hongroise,” “Midsummer Night’s Dream” and several rhapsodies; Rubinstein’s “Melodie In F,” “Serenede Russe,” “Barcatolle,” “Gavotte” and “Valse Caprice.” Chopin is represented in Tom’s repertory by “Fantasie Impromptu,” “Ballade in G Minor,” “Scherzo In B Flat Minor” and several waltzes, and Mendelssohn by “Songs Without Words” and “Rondo Capriccioso.”

This account of Poznanski's teaching approach demonstrates the ways that the presentation of Wiggins' abilities was shaped by calculated direction and enculturation into the norms of Western art music culture—a process that highlighted the revered place of canonized composers and enforced the rigidity of the work concept that accompanied them. Indeed, as Chapter 4 will examine in the context of other children perceived to be gifted, Wiggins was not innately or incidentally drawn to the types of practice techniques favored by Western concert music pedagogues; instructors like Poznanski developed teaching approaches that persuaded the young musician to repeat passages numerous times to achieve an ease that would later appear to have come naturally.

Pianist and teacher Anna Tutein had been in the audience during one of Wiggins' performances in Philadelphia in 1886 and volunteered to be one of the pianist's challengers for his memory trick, performing a difficult passage from Beethoven.⁶⁶ Much to Wiggins' managers' chagrin, Blind Tom was stumped by the passage, prompting Bethune to hire Tutein as his tutor. Ten years after Wiggins' death, Tutein wrote about her experiences teaching him: "I must also dispel the idea that Tom could repeat anything after having heard it once. The lessons were two hours in length, and it was often necessary for me to play over the compositions fifty times before he would acquire them." She admitted, however, that Wiggins could "remember an astonishing number of measures. I would 'feed' him eight or ten measures at a time and then he would play them over several times and we would go on with others."⁶⁷ In conjunction with the Bethunes and his many managers, dozens of teachers like Howard, Poznanski, and Tutein carefully crafted Wiggins into the persona of Blind Tom, who was then advertised as a prodigy, a genius, a pianist who could repeat any piece of music after hearing it once.

⁶⁶ Johnson Publishing Company, *Black World/Negro Digest* (Johnson Publishing Company, 1961), 18.

⁶⁷ Anna Amalie Tutein, "The Phenomenon of 'Blind Tom': The Most Remarkable Instance of the Operation of the Sub-Conscious Mind in Music," *The Etude*, February 1918.

Not all onlookers subscribed unquestioningly to the myth that Blind Tom's talent was "discovered" rather than "cultivated," however. Likewise, a notable contingent of educators and musicians (like Lowell Mason, mentioned on p. 100) had already started to question broader conceits that musical talent was a discoverable innate ability present only in a select few individuals. Figures like H.J. Wiesel, whose commentaries appear in multiple sections of this chapter, along with scores of anonymous authors—writing in music-specializing publications like *Dwight's Journal of Music* and *The Etude* instead of mainstream newspapers and periodicals—forwarded their share of carefully collected evidence supporting the theory that Thomas Wiggins was impressive but imperfect, skilled at deciphering and remembering musical sounds but also highly educated. As one of these anonymous authors wrote,

It is conceivable that the uncultivated soul should be opened by the immediate inspiration of genius to a deep appreciation or raised to the original conception of the highest music; but that genius alone can give the understanding of the manner in which a particular instrument is made to utter that music, that men ever have an a priori knowledge of the piano and an innate propensity to "the fingering of the schools,"—he who believes may hold, with Dogberry, that "to be a well favored man is the gift of Fortune, but to write and read comes by Nature."⁶⁸

It is the sentiments of the beginning of this statement, however, with which this chapter is concerned: the author's belief in the category of the uncultivated *soul*, the phenomenon of the immediate inspiration of *genius*. Regardless of authors' interrogation of the naturalness of Blind Tom's talent, the underlying belief that genius, and talent, were out there to be discovered was ubiquitous in the discourse examined here.

Thomas Wiggins' life story contains many additional chapters that I do not have space to discuss here; it is a story that ended with his many deaths in 1908, where the chapter began. Here, however, I have considered the development and strategic exhibition—the invention—of his

⁶⁸ F., "More about Tom," *Dwight's Journal of Music* 22, no. 10 (December 6, 1862).

exceptional musical abilities, a topic most scholars have either oversimplified or further mythologized as an inexplicable and happenstantial stroke of luck, the reason for his success and proof that talent will out, like a truth waiting to be revealed.⁶⁹ In the conclusion to her three-volume series, Geneva Southall commented that she was surprised to find that contemporary scholarship continued to emphasize Blind Tom's natural pianistic gifts despite the widespread evidence of his extensive musical education. Radano pondered a similar issue in his discussion of Wiggins' story, wondering why "so many white observers actually desired to claim for Tom such remarkable gifts."⁷⁰ Rather than a mere oversight, such tropes of innateness and discovery perform specific discursive functions, as do the four other tensions I will examine in the chapter's subsequent sections. I support Southall's assessment that "Tom was no 'idiot savant,' whose abilities resulted from a 'natural talent.' His musical achievements were acquired as a result of constant musical instruction and considerable practice over the years."⁷¹ In the following sections, I hope to address Radano's and Southall's queries and better understand *why* these alternative narratives about Wiggins's talent—and talent more generally—developed and thrived.

Gift / Commodity

Tom is really a wonderfully gifted player. He has a marvelous ear and wonderful delicacy of touch, but these gifts are shut up in the body of an overgrown child.⁷²

This quotation, from an entry in author Willa Cather's diary after she saw Blind Tom perform in 1894, is one of many accounts that refers to Wiggins' "gift" of musical talent—a powerful metaphor that nineteenth-century Americans lived by, to summon Lakoff and Johnson's

⁶⁹ As I discussed in a footnote on page 22, "talent will out" is an idiom that has arisen in my fieldwork and elsewhere which summons the famous quotation from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

⁷⁰ Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 176.

⁷¹ Southall, *Blind Tom, the Black Pianist-Composer (1849-1908)*, 169–70.

⁷² Willa Cather, *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902* (U of Nebraska Press, 1970).

figuration.⁷³ Here, Cather describes Blind Tom's giftedness as embodied—situated in his ears and his fingers—while also ontologically separate from his body, “shut up” in it. From where or whom, then, did Blind Tom's musical “gifts” derive? If they were trapped or shut up in his body in a seemingly provisional way, who was originally and ultimately in possession of these gifts? Related questions about Blind Tom's abilities were concerned not only with how he managed to play so proficiently (though that was a continual query), but also with the cultural “value” of musical abilities and the politics of their possession more broadly.

Blind Tom's musicality vacillated between being glorified as a gift and exchanged like a commodity. According to some characterizations, his talent transcended the commercial contexts in which he performed; to others, his staged tricks were merely a product of the nineteenth-century culture industry.⁷⁴ Though commodity exchange and gift economies have largely been examined as separate economic ecosystems, they are often imbricated in complex ways, as was the case with the ethical and metaphorical economies in which Wiggins' musical abilities participated.⁷⁵ The relationship between Wiggins' musical “gifts” and his status as the highest-earning American pianist of the nineteenth century was reciprocal: at the heart of Blind Tom's commodity value was the widespread belief in his seemingly miraculous giftedness, and at the heart of the invention of his “gifts” was Bethune's desire to transform his human property into a profitable musical commodity. And he succeeded; Charles Magill, looking back on Wiggins' life, put it in the *Chicago Defender*, “Tom made three different fortunes for white people through his wonderful gift.”⁷⁶ Magill's turn of phrase highlights the irony of this exchange of the pianist's “gift”; though Blind Tom is the subject of the

⁷³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁷⁴ The following chapter revisits this dichotomy in the context of twentieth and twenty-first century talent shows, which inherited many production tactics and ideological positions from the showmen like Bethune and Oliver.

⁷⁵ As John Frow has discussed, “the concepts of gift and commodity seem to partake of each other: the gift to be structured, as Marcel Mauss clearly recognized, according to forms of calculation and interest that in some sense resemble those of a market economy, and commodities in turn to be constantly endowed with non-commodity meanings as they move within the moral economy of everyday life.” Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture*, 102.

⁷⁶ Magill, “Blind Tom, Unsolved Problem in Musical History.”

sentence, the person whose labor “made” the fortune, he benefited neither from possessing his gifts nor from the capital they generated.

Indeed, from his birth to his death, and in more than one way, Blind Tom was possessed. Most literally, he was born into slavery; his body, and the musical labor it performed, was governed and legally owned by members of the Bethune family. As one writer for *Dwight’s Journal* matter-of-factly noted, “Our readers will remember a recent news item giving an account of a musical prodigy, in the shape of a blind negro boy, ‘owned’ by a Mr. Oliver, of Georgia, which (the property) plays the piano intuitively, with surprising power.” As the previous section discussed, the pianist’s state of possession following emancipation was merely reframed, his declared “idiocy” granting his former owners a guardianship that earned him (rather than any profits) the undesirable moniker of “the last legal slave in America.”⁷⁷ Most accounts that labeled Wiggins as possessed, however, referred to something else, though something related.⁷⁸ His body was not only owned from without; it was also occupied from within, by something or someone more plausibly responsible for his musical accomplishments.

He swayed himself about; his eyeballs rolled; his fingers twitched involuntarily; and he seemed like one possessed.⁷⁹

He was possessed; some ghost spoke through him.⁸⁰

His ear catches every harmony, and his whole being seems entranced and controlled by it.⁸¹

It was as if the soul of a Beethoven had slipped into the body of an idiot.⁸²

⁷⁷ Andre T. Regan, *The Last Legal Slave in America*, Documentary, Short, 2006, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0823648/>.

⁷⁸ As Johnson notes, “Spirit possession and property possession should not be seen as opposed, then, as ‘spiritual’ versus ‘material’ matters, but rather as thoroughly enmeshed semantic and ideological fields.” Paul Christopher Johnson, “An Atlantic Genealogy of ‘Spirit Possession,’” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, no. 2 (2011): 393–425.

⁷⁹ *The Marvelous Musical Prodigy, Blind Tom*.

⁸⁰ Rebecca Harding Davis, “Blind Tom,” *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1862.

⁸¹ *The Marvelous Musical Prodigy, Blind Tom*.

⁸² Cather, *The World and the Parish*, 165.

Accounts like these proposed a range of hypotheses regarding the exact identity of the slave's musical possessor: perhaps he was inhabited by God himself, a spirit, the soul of some other musician, the devil.

Such accounts of the pianist wavered threateningly between two racialized genealogies of possession—one that produced the most revered musical art, and one that precluded the possibility of the type of art recognized by European American cultural authorities. Often, like the most renowned and mysterious musical geniuses of yore, Wiggins was possessed by a modern iteration of the genius's etymological ancestor, the genius one *had* rather than the genius one *was*, the guardian god that accompanied a man from his birth to his death.⁸³

These original compositions increase the wondering interest excited by the performance of this prodigy, and force us to look upon him as one possessed of that rare and strange gift termed genius.⁸⁴

They will remember him shuffling to the piano, trembling like a leaf, with lips moving rapidly and eyes blinking as fast and then see him transformed into a medium which music chose to be a wondrous translator of her heavenly language.⁸⁵

This type of possession was usually reserved for Blind Tom's European contemporaries like Sigismund Thalberg or Ignasi Paderewski, but especially, as many reviewers mentioned, the likes of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven. This noble and non-savage form of possession was what Peter Kivy has discussed as the dominion of the "Platonic genius": the genius whose body is possessed not by inimical spirits, but by the divine. This type of possessed genius was, as Arthur Schopenhauer described it, he who "alone was capable of producing genuine works of art."⁸⁶

⁸³ Darrin M. McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (Basic Books, 2013).

⁸⁴ "The Blind Black Boy Pianist," *Dwight's Journal of Music* 17, no. 26 (September 22, 1860).

⁸⁵ "Blind Tome Bethune: The Death of His Old Master Recalls the Prodigy."

⁸⁶ Schopenhauer, *The Art of Literature*.

For other observers, Blind Tom's brand of possession was interpreted as that kind relegated to the Other, an anthropological spirit possession equally opaque, but less culturally momentous than the type of possession credited to the likes of Mozart and Beethoven.⁸⁷ Rather than resulting in a considered aesthetic object, this form of possession betrayed its object to be a primitive animal, an irrational automaton, or in the case of black bodies during this era, some combination of both.⁸⁸ Just as certain types of spirit possession had become one of the "key markers in the 'primitive' stage of the evolution of civilizations" by the nineteenth century, as historian P. J. Johnson has observed, certain types of talent were attributed to a "primitive" class of musicians.⁸⁹ As I argued in Chapter 1, this was the type of talent Thomas Jefferson described a century earlier in considering African American musicality, also utilizing the metaphor of a gift: "In music they are generally more gifted than whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch."⁹⁰ This understanding of talent, like the Afro-anthropological brand of spirit possession, was relegated to the realm of primitive cultural expression—the natural, the nobly savage, the necessarily unrefinable. As I explore further in the following section, it focused on mimicry and excluded the possibility of creativity. It was in opposition to the *sui generis* nature of musical genius.

Despite the sense in which Wiggins' state of possession was understood, it resulted in the pianist being denied his own will, musical or otherwise. His talent, his gift, happened *to* him; it was not cultivated *by* him. Stripped of personal autonomy, he was commanded, whether by the Bethunes or the soul of Beethoven. In the minds of many onlookers, he was the opposite of a self-possessed

⁸⁷ Johnson, "An Atlantic Genealogy of 'Spirit Possession,'" 26.

⁸⁸ Best, *The Fugitive's Properties*. And, as Benjamin Reiss noted on the ideological slippage between automata, black bodies, and animals: "Black people and apes were fitting forms for automata since they both posed—in different degrees—questions for white audiences about bodies that resembled dominant conceptions of 'the human' but that may or may not have lacked fully human powers of intentionality or rational agency. Black automata, additionally, repeated at the level of amusement slavery's system of bodily domination." Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 121.

⁸⁹ Johnson, "An Atlantic Genealogy of 'Spirit Possession,'" 26.

⁹⁰ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

and self-actualized musical creator; instead of airing the voice of his own spirit through his musical expressions, he was inspired.⁹¹ After hearing his characteristic mix of classical works and occasionally more clangorous original compositions, onlookers were not sure which form of inspiration or possession had overtaken the pianist—primitive demons or genius-producing deities—revealing, uncomfortably, how similar the signifiers of these two phenomena actually were. As a writer for the *Brooklyn Eagle* observed (emphasis added): “At times Tom seemed almost *inspired* and the melody would flow with all the *natural* beauty and the delightful cadence of the rippling of a woodland rill; again, there would be a clash of harmony and discord—like sweet bells jangling *wildly* out of tune.”⁹² Despite their near indistinguishableness, these two archetypes of possession held meaningfully different cultural consequences. If Blind Tom’s talent, his gift, was indeed “inspired,” what other unexpected, unexplored bodies might be thus possessed?

Most often, however, discourses about Blind Tom credited nature as the giver of his musical gifts, reflecting not only older Enlightenment personifications of nature in relation to artistic production, but also more recent arguments about the heritability of genius and the natural development of innate “gifts” by thinkers like Charles Darwin and Francis Galton. Galton himself used the metaphor of giftedness often in his influential *Hereditary Genius*, which not only scientifically bolstered beliefs in the innate superiority of certain individuals and groups, but also founded the eugenics movement using the same logic, calling the type of genetic determinism he investigated the “hereditary transmission of physical gifts” and arguing that “it would be quite practicable to produce a highly-*gifted* race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations.”⁹³ The most explicitly “natural” of all naturalizations of musical ability, such understandings of Nature as responsible for musical aptitude deprived Wiggins of creative control,

⁹¹ Indeed, “Inspire” derives from the Latin *inspirare* “breathe or blow into,” from *in-* (“into”) and *spirare* (“breathe.”)

⁹² “Blind Tom at the Orpheum.”

⁹³ Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, 1. Emphasis added.

rendering him—like all musicians—merely a beneficiary of Nature’s whims. As the editor of *The Etude* bluntly put it in one of Wiggins’ obituaries, the pianist was “quite as wonderful as the Natural Bridge, the Mammoth Cave or the Grand Canyon.”⁹⁴ A writer for the North Carolina *Fayetteville Observer* described Wiggins as a sort of treasure chest for mother Nature: “he seems to be an unconscious agent acting as he is acted on, and his mind a vacant receptacle where Nature stores her jewels to recall them at her pleasure.” As one *Washington Post* author declared, “Nature had been in her most fantastic mood when she fashioned him, and with an uncouth figure and an intellect only one degree removed from imbecility she had joined her divine gift of music.”⁹⁵ Or, as a writer for the *Baltimore Sun* declared, “Accustomed to regard it as a gift, improved and perfected by cultivation and practice, we here find it perfectly developed in a blind Negro boy, and constitution a part of his nature, as much so as the color of his skin.”⁹⁶ In comments like these, onlookers are acknowledging—somewhat radically, considering the status of concurrent debates about racial uplift and musicality—that such “natural” systems of Western art music gift bestowal can apply to “uncouth figures” as well as figures like the European virtuosi that drew large American crowds during concert tours.

Thus, the presence of Blind Tom’s gift, like all musical talent conceived as such, metaphorically rendered a complex process infused with effort and inventive thinking into an isolatable, immutable object, or, rather a musical “thing” the pianist received and, in turn, gave to his audiences who received his performances.⁹⁷ Blind Tom’s gift was further objectified through the “tricks” that he performed, which Perry Oliver and his other inventors developed specifically to put this gift on display, as in a museum (or a circus, as this chapter’s final section will discuss). One

⁹⁴ “The Remarkable Case of the Late ‘Blind Tom.’”

⁹⁵ “Blind Tome Bethune: The Death of His Old Master Recalls the Prodigy.”

⁹⁶ “Tom’ the Musical Wonder.”

⁹⁷ “The thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.” Blind Tom, in his black enslaved subjectivity, brought attention to the particular dimensions of the “thing” that was his musical gift. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 4.

witness, under the pseudonym D.E.F. Keys, described Wiggins' demonstrations as a "display" of his gifts in *The Musical World*, again depicting the pianist's body as in a state of possession: "Another exploit is the execution on the piano of a tune heard for the first time only a moment before. Even while he is displaying his peculiar gifts, the appearance of utter idiocy remains; his face goes into curious contortions, when his notes become more than commonly expressive."⁹⁸ This conception of Blind Tom's gift, once isolated, was then appreciated as discrete—temporally, but also from his psychological, emotional, or physical self. In addition to creating a forum to display Wiggins' gifts *qua* gifts, these tricks rendered his talent all the more commodifiable. One writer for the *Musical World* observed that Blind Tom "showed considerable power of execution—enough, perhaps, to make one regret that his talent was chiefly directed to mere tricks, if one did not reflect that tricks may be more profitable than displays of art."⁹⁹

As I have discussed in Chapter 1, and as the voices included in this chapter have further illustrated, the metaphor of giftedness was loaded with ethical and etymological baggage that accompanied pronouncements of Wiggins and other musicians as gifted. In its old German sense, *das Gift* (deriving from the verb "to give") contained the paired meanings of "present" and "poison."¹⁰⁰ Marcel Mauss formatively observed that "the present or possession that is changed into poison" was a common theme in Germanic folklore and has endured in some narratives around giving.¹⁰¹ Among others, Radano and J. Griffith Rollefson have considered this coupled temptation and threat of giftedness in the context of black music, interpreting the invention of black music as a "Trojan horse" which, "once accepted and valorized as a national treasure by (white) American mainstream society, contained the ingredients to destabilize America's white supremacist racial

⁹⁸ D.E.F. Keys (M.D.), "Rational Recreation: Letters to Well-Known Characters, To J. V. Bridgeman, Esq," *The Musical World*, September 1, 1866.

⁹⁹ *The Musical World*, September 1, 1866.

¹⁰⁰ Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 283; Rollefson, *Flip the Script*, 75.

¹⁰¹ Marcel Mauss, *Essai Sur Le Don* (Psychology Press, 2002), 81.

ideology.”¹⁰² Blind Tom’s evident pianistic and compositional skills, which resembled that of other “gifted” virtuosi, were particularly equipped to gain entry into the Trojan fortress of onlookers’ racialized understandings of talent, further exacerbating the ideological inconsistencies at the heart of their perceptions of giftedness and possession.

As this section has illustrated, then, there was by no means a consensus about Wiggins’ musical abilities, the nature of his possession, or his possession of gifts. Figures like German pianist H.J. Wiesel and a *Dwight’s* author self-titled “a lady who is musical” furiously and comprehensively denigrated Blind Tom’s musical skills, and many others denied that he possessed the sort of sophisticated or creative “gifts” that his European contemporaries did, interpreting his abilities as that of a mimic or machine. Though these discourses have not revealed a cohesive understanding of the quality or quantity of gifts that Wiggins possessed, they have pointed to several dominant ideological threads that spanned his lifetime.

More than a decade before Blind Tom’s birth, Boston-based music education advocate Lowell Mason had started to promote the idea that musical talent was a valuable gift, but not one given only to a select few. Rather, he argued, talent was a natural resource distributed more equitably than many assumed: “The musical talent is one given us by our Maker. It is a responsible and sacred talent; and can we do otherwise than yield to the constraining obligation ‘to stir up the gift that is in us!’ Few can plead incapacity, and no one has a right to do it, until he has subjected his powers to a rigid examination. No talent however vigorous, springs spontaneously into action. Some labor is necessary to unfold its latent energies.”¹⁰³ This perspective had gained further momentum as an alternative discourse by the end of Wiggins’ lifetime; as a piano teacher named Constantin von Sternberg wrote for *The Etude* in 1897 (where he described Blind Tom as an idiot whose musical

¹⁰² Rollefson, *Flip the Script*, 75.

¹⁰³ Lowell Mason and Boston Academy of Music, *Manual of the Boston Academy of Music, for Instruction in the Elements of Vocal Music, on the System of Pestalozzi* (Boston, J.H. Wilkins & R.B. Carter, 1838).

ability resembled only that of a parrot or other animal), “I do not believe that there is such a thing as ‘musical talent,’” citing a child’s general intelligence as the only barrier to teaching all children how to be fluent musicians.¹⁰⁴

Body / Soul

We only state what we saw in all its astonishing features and leave our readers to determine for themselves whether the Chinese transmigration theory is correct—whether the soul of some unfortunate defunct musician misbehaving on earth, has been banished into the awkward and angular body of Blind Tom.¹⁰⁵

To read descriptions of Thomas Wiggins written during his lifetime was to encounter a multiply divided subject—a subject that literally embodied and incorporated contradiction according to many contemporary understandings of musical ability. Witnesses of his performances often wondered which portion of Blind Tom’s partitioned self was responsible for his exceptional musical sensibilities: his body, his soul, his mind, or some source further outside (or, as the previous section considered, inside) the bounds of his physical self? Here, I examine the various characterizations of Blind Tom’s divided subjectivity to understand how onlookers reconciled the various aspects of his identity—his blindness, his cognitive impairment, his mannerisms and personality, and especially his blackness—with his musical abilities. Rather than uniquely addressing Blind Tom’s talent, these characterizations were symptomatic of larger debates about the physical or metaphysical locus of musical talent during this latter half of the century. Although this section’s title is intended to gesture to this broadest discursive division of Wiggins’ self, we will discuss how his mind, body, soul, and consciousness were divided in multiple ways.

It seemed almost mandatory for writing about Blind Tom’s performances to include extensive accounts of his body.¹⁰⁶ Sometimes these authors interpreted his anatomy as the legible

¹⁰⁴ Constantin von Sternberg, “The Dull Pupil,” *The Etude* 15, no. 1 (April 1897): 101.

¹⁰⁵ From the *Albany Argus* in *The Marvelous Musical Prodigy, Blind Tom*.

¹⁰⁶ In this chapter, I have used the phrase “black body” to describe Wiggins, among many other terms meant to convey the ways he was perceived and characterized by his contemporaries. I am aware of debates within black studies (and

text of a racialized scientific specimen, and other times as the vessel for an otherwise dissonant inner world. Either way, the authors of these descriptions seemed to believe that such vivid physical details would communicate important details about his musical capabilities. Indeed, Blind Tom's body was a central focus of discourse from the very start, even in the many iterations of his musical origin story. One author for *The Etude*, for instance, characterized the newborn Tom as a "small bundle of black pulp" who was "regarded as valueless even as a human chattel" before the mythical moment that his talent was unexpectedly discovered.¹⁰⁷ As the previous section explored, such descriptions of Wiggins' body—seen, as Hortense Spillers described it, as a "zero-degree" of flesh—set the stage (like any good magic show) for the ensuing, unexpected discovery of the metaphorical gold that was his talent, which Bethune then mined for profits as though it were an unlimited natural resource.¹⁰⁸

These descriptions of Wiggins' flesh often disclosed the political and scientific orientation of the authors, as well as their beliefs about the pianist's musical abilities. The notoriously critical review of Blind Tom by musician H.J. Wiesel, for instance, described him as possessing a "protruding chin, blubber lips, bright teeth, flat nose, eyes of a blurred appearance, such as may be observed in very aged negroes, and partially closed, retreating forehead, head very full in the occipital but deficient in the frontal region, wool on his head, of course, and feet like cradle-rockers."¹⁰⁹ Conversely, a writer for the *Anti-Slavery* reporter attempted to defend and validate Wiggins exceptional skills using a similar rubric: "In length the cranium is considerably above the average of white or black, and ample for a head an inch larger in circumference. This extreme length

elsewhere) about scholars' tendency to refer to "black bodies" rather than "black people"; despite its original intention to highlight the ways certain peoples' bodies were denied full humanity, "bodies" have become a terminological trend that often euphemistically replaces "people," reinscribing the very problematic perspective it initially addressed.

¹⁰⁷ "The Remarkable Case of the Late 'Blind Tom.'"

¹⁰⁸ She explains the discrepancy thus: "I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions." Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diaeritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81.

¹⁰⁹ Wiesel, "Blind Tom."

indicates—according to the phrenological theory—great strength of the perceptive faculties, and in Tom these are said to be much above the average.”¹¹⁰ It was usual for descriptions to invoke such vocabularies and concepts from scientific discourses, which directly linked visible bodily characteristics—physical, physiological, and racial—with various cognitive, cultural, social, and indeed musical capabilities.¹¹¹

While such frameworks had long existed within older racist phrenological and craniometric paradigms, the first decades of Wiggins’ career paralleled the spread of equally scientifically insidious rationalizations of African American intellectual inferiority through biological and evolutionary logics. During the first decades of Blind Tom’s fame, figures like Herbert Spencer and Francis Galton presented popular new theories about the heritability of specific aptitudes that extended teleological understandings of race from the visual to the audible (and, soon thereafter, by figures like Carl Seashore discussed in Chapter 1, to the testable).¹¹² Both Spencer and Galton explicitly discussed music in their writing, forwarding arguments that began to unsettle Romantic conceptions of musical genius and inspiration as beyond the realm of scientific explanation, arguing that musical development paralleled other social-evolutionary pathways, with African-diasporic “primitives” possessing only a base level of capability for musical sophistication. Wiggins’ legacy, however, defied both of these coeval racist explanations of superior musical ability, forcing onlookers to reconsider their assumptions on both fronts.

¹¹⁰ “Blind Tom, the Negro Pianist,” *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, April 1, 1867.

¹¹¹ As one phrenologist discussed in 1869, those with “very large” musical organs of the brain “possess extraordinary musical taste and talent, and are literally transported by good music; and with large Imitation and Constructiveness, fair time, and a fine temperament, are an exquisite performer; learn tunes by hearing them sung once; sing in spirit and with melting pathos; show intuitive taste and skill; sing *from* the soul and *to* the soul.” Orson Squire Fowler, *The Practical Phrenologist and Recorder and Delineator of the Character and Talents of [Blank], as Marked by [Blank]: A Compendium of Phrenological Science* (O.S. Fowler, 1869), 152.

¹¹² Galton, *Hereditary Genius*; Herbert Spencer, *First Principles* (D. Appleton and Company, 1864). Rather than setting out to explain the psychology of figures like Shakespeare or Beethoven that embody a particular conception of a genius, Galton hoped to draw broader conclusions about “exceptionally high” and “inborn” abilities in the general population. Indeed, these traits came to be associated with the idea of “talent” even more so than “genius.”

One recurring conclusion was that nothing at all lurked beyond or within the visible mechanism of Wiggins body. Characterizations of African Americans as liminal figures, somewhere between human, animal, and machine, were standard during Wiggins' lifetime and manifest in descriptions of his playing. As Steven Johnson noted, "blacks were poised not merely between the categories of 'human' and animal. The Negro was poised also between rational agent and soulless machine, between mindless brute and what George Lamming once described as 'man-shaped ploughs.'"¹¹³ Many did not interpret his performances as evidence of "true" musical talent, but rather something more like the (impressive, but nevertheless non-musical) sonic mimicry of a parrot, automaton, or sound-replicating machine. Often, Blind Tom's abilities were compared to the new phonograph technologies, a storage device for others' creative efforts.

Tom is not and never was an artist, he is simply a human phonograph—and not a perfect one at that. His 'receiver' is defective, but his 'transmitter' is perfect.¹¹⁴

Probably there has never been seen on the stage a stranger figure or one more uncanny. He is a human phonograph, a sort of animated memory, with sound producing powers.¹¹⁵

He was merely an imitating machine, a human automat to all intents and purposes. He was not a thinking machine.¹¹⁶

That Tom knew the compositions he played by name, and could play them at command, indicates another form of intelligence with which he should be credited. But it was a kind of intelligence like that of putting a new record on a talking machine.¹¹⁷

Constantin von Sternberg acknowledged Blind Tom as a footnoted example in his article on so-called dull students, stating, "he never made music any more than a parrot; neither expresses

¹¹³ Johnson here is discussing Sylvia Wynter's theorization of historical understandings of black humanity in relation to constructions of minstrel figures. Stephen Johnson, *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 116.

¹¹⁴ "Blind Tom at the Orpheum."

¹¹⁵ Cather, *The World and the Parish*, 165.

¹¹⁶ *Magic, Unity, Might* (Society of American Magicians, 1916), 4.

¹¹⁷ Tutein, "The Phenomenon of 'Blind Tom': The Most Remarkable Instance of the Operation of the Sub-Conscious Mind in Music."

thought nor sentiment; both act under a purely animal imitative impulse, and have nothing to do with art.”¹¹⁸

Further, many onlookers concluded that the apparent “idiocy” of Blind Tom’s mind precluded the possibility of there being musical creativity or deeper understanding of the “science” behind his musical output. One such description described the directionality of Blind Tom’s “inspiration” as reversed from that of a genuinely talented originator of musical art, flowing into his body from the outside: “An extatic [sic] influence flows from the keys into his fingers, and rolls like a tide through his veins, lighting up a fire in every nerve as it courses along.”¹¹⁹ These accounts attributed certain skills not to Wiggins’ “mind” or “intellect,” but instead to his body alone, describing traits like his “accurate ear,” or his fingers, which possessed an “indispensable lithesomeness.”¹²⁰ Rather than being specific to discourse about Blind Tom’s musicality, these explanations are typical of nineteenth-century conflation of the capabilities of the “ear” and what pedagogues often describe as “ear training”— between physical sensory capacity and cultivated, culturally specific skill sets.¹²¹ Perhaps it was Blind Tom’s unusually sensitive sensory perception, then, that was responsible for his impressive performances. As one reviewer mused, positing that Blind Tom may even possess super-natural sensory abilities, “The sightless eye-balls seem to be searching in the stars, and the great opera ear seems to be catching harmony from celestial spheres.”¹²² Each of these descriptions of Blind Tom’s bodily capacities as responsible for his pianistic skills were consonant with discourses of black subjectivities as synonymous with the black

¹¹⁸ von Sternberg, “The Dull Pupil.”

¹¹⁹ “A Black Prodigy in the Musical World: From the *Baltimore Patriot*.”

¹²⁰ Of course, I do not intend to endorse a Cartesian dualism in this reading, but aim to point out that *all* intellectual engagement was denied him in such descriptions. “Blind Tom, the Negro Pianist.”

¹²¹ Carl Seashore and others would take this assumption that “hearing” is equivalent to “musicality” to a new level in aptitude tests of the early twentieth century, which aimed to test for musical talent (or tone “deafness”) through asking students to identify sonic features like pitch, intensity, duration, and extensity, in the same way that simultaneously developing Intelligence Quotient tests aimed to detect an innate quantity of intellectual perception. Carl Emil Seashore, *The Psychology of Musical Talent* (Silver, Burdett, 1919).

¹²² “The Blind Black Boy Pianist.”

bodies that contained them—as mechanistic, athletic, physical, mimetic rather than creative. Even his own original compositions, of which he composed dozens if not hundreds over the course of his career, were often denounced as merely imitative of nature rather than original works, an assumption facilitated by the programmatic nature of many of his pieces. “His battle piece [*The Battle of Manassas*] gave evidence of his imitative powers.”¹²³

This understanding of Wiggins’ mimesis, however, often precariously overlapped with coeval discourses about the ideal performer within the *Werktreue* paradigm, which valued a performer’s fidelity to the intentions of a work’s composer—his ability to serve as a type of medium between the musical souls of a work’s originator and those of the audience.¹²⁴ By Wiggins’ lifetime, this *Werktreue* ideal had become a prominent rubric by which concert pianists were evaluated.¹²⁵ As Karen Leistra-Jones has argued, musical mimesis—not unlike the type of self-subjugating mimicry being ascribed to Blind Tom’s playing—was valorized in *Werktreue*-centered Western classical pedagogy as “a deliberate and noble kind of *kenosis* or self-emptying” performed by musicians in order to make room for the presence of the work’s true sentiments.¹²⁶ Such understandings of performers as mediators and embodied vehicles for the transmission of musical experience uncannily resembled the type of possession and mimicry that many authors described after witnessing Blind Tom. As Willa Cather noted, summoning the name of the prototypical composer of this ideal, “It was wonderful to see what the man could do. It was as if the soul of a Beethoven had slipped into the

¹²³ “At The Academy of Music: Blind Tom’s Concerts,” *New York Tribune*, October 11, 1865.

¹²⁴ Mary Hunter helpfully summoned a passage from Hegel’s *Aesthetics* as an embodiment of this increasingly mimetic conception of the performer, “The executant artist not only need not, but must not, add anything of his own, or otherwise he will spoil the effect. He must submit himself entirely to the character of the work and intend only to be an obedient instrument.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*: (Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹²⁵ As Leistra-Jones and others have discussed, this ideal of performance contrasted with the improvising, self-promoting virtuoso, but as other sections of this chapter detail, this paradigm of piano performance also intersected with discourses of Wiggins’ musical abilities.

¹²⁶ Karen Leistra-Jones, “Staging Authenticity: Joachim, Brahms, and the Politics of *Werktreue* Performance,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (2013): 430.

body of an idiot. In his ears and his fingers Tom is the peer of some masterful musicians.”¹²⁷

Through this simile, Cather suggests that Wiggins’ body, rather than a cultivated understanding of music, is responsible for this mimesis—and Beethoven’s soul is the original source of the musical content that audiences found so moving.¹²⁸

Amalie Tutein, one of Wiggins’ teachers introduced above, described how his experience of playing seemed to become overtaken by something like a musical subconscious, resembling a type of wholly absorptive musical authenticity that eradicated suspicions that his act was purely theatrical: “Now we come to that other mind—the diamond in the swine’s mire. That it was something quite different from his conscious mind is shown by those strange indications of receptivity manifested by strange hissing sounds when his sub-conscious mind was working.”¹²⁹ Mark Twain hypothesized that it was not a subconscious, but rather “Some archangel, cast out of upper Heaven like another Satan” that inhabited his “coarse casket. It is not Blind Tom that does these wonderful things and plays this wonderful music—it is the other party.”¹³⁰ Indeed, both of the musical archetypes that discourses of Wiggins straddled—the self-emptying mimesis of the authentic *Werktreue* pianist, or the mimetic, idiotic, musicking black body—outlined similar conceptions of musical talent: as possessed by another soul, as faithful to another’s musical intentions, as embodied rather than intellectual, analytical, or creative. The fact that he was known to speak almost entirely in the third person only compounded the case for such beliefs. As one observer remarked, “He did not know that one note has always an exact and unchangeable relative value to all other notes, and that all

¹²⁷ Cather, *The World and the Parish*, 165.

¹²⁸ As Giannone has discussed, Cather believed in an essential division between body and soul in musical contexts. “The dualistic idea of soul derives from Willa Cather’s view of the human personality. Man is divided. As the speech of the soul, music becomes the medium of man’s higher nature. The account of Blind Tom, the astonishing Negro pianist who could accurately reproduce whatever he heard, presupposes a belief that music is a medium of the spirit. Richard Giannone, *Music in Willa Cather’s Fiction* (U of Nebraska Press, 2001), 9.

¹²⁹ Tutein, “The Phenomenon of ‘Blind Tom’: The Most Remarkable Instance of the Operation of the Sub-Conscious Mind in Music.”

¹³⁰ Mark Twain, “Blind Tom and His Performances,” *San Francisco Alta California*, August 1, 1869.

combinations of tones or half tones may be computed mathematically. With him music was not science; it was nature.”¹³¹ Wiggins was perhaps too convincing in his mimesis; he had a what Michael Taussig has called a “surfeit of mimetic power.”¹³²

Some observers found the appearance of Blind Tom’s playing to be more simply monstrous than memetic, invoking a feeling of the uncanny, of cognitive dissonance. Willa Cather described the pianist’s performances as akin to something Frankenstein’s monster might have done: disjointed, grotesque, mechanistic, monstrous. Cather was not the only onlooker to connect Blind Tom’s effect to the realm of the uncanny, or to describe the pianist in ways reminiscent of the popular story of Mary Shelley’s monster. Indeed, the story of Frankenstein’s creature became so popular that the narrative had transformed into a common myth by the end of the century. As Mladen Dolar has observed, this myth could be understood in the Levi-Straussian sense, as a logical model meant to resolve apparent contradictions.¹³³ For Cather and many others in the late nineteenth century, Blind Tom’s musical talent occupied a similar set of contradictions—between nature and culture, and between the realities of his musical abilities and what many onlookers expected of a black, blind, and cognitively impaired man. This connection between Wiggins and an uncanny nonhuman realm was not unique; Louis Chude-Sokei describes the broader characterization in this way: “It is precisely this promiscuous liminality, with its relentless slippages between the categories of Negro and animal and machine, inhuman, nonhuman, and subhuman, that makes the Freudian uncanny necessary.”¹³⁴ For

¹³¹ “The Remarkable Case of the Late ‘Blind Tom.’”

¹³² Taussig describes this “mimetic power” in the context of magical feelings, talking machines, and systems of supremacy, arguing that fascination with mimesis represents a reinvigoration of “the primitivism implicit in technology’s wildest dreams.” For Wiggins, then, his mimetic abilities reversed the usual dynamic Taussig describes, invoking a sense of befuddled enchantment in his white viewers and (seemingly) commanding the type of technological power usually reserved for Western stewards of technological innovation and power. Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (Psychology Press, 1993), 208.

¹³³ Mladen Dolar, “‘I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night’: Lacan and the Uncanny,” *October* 58 (1991): 5–23.

¹³⁴ Stephen Johnson, *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

many, the uncanny spectacle of Wiggins, whose body was black and intellect was “idiotic” served as a confirmation of suspicions that musical abilities resided neither in the mind nor the body.

We see this awkward and stupid negro led to the piano stool; he takes his seat, but the first touch on the keys shows us that his soul is made for music.¹³⁵

He takes his seat but the first touch on the responsive keys shows us that his soul is made for melody.¹³⁶

Tom not only imitates immediately the most difficult and beautiful performances, but improvises sweet, celestial melodies. He speaks a language on the piano, his little dark soul never learned on the plantation.¹³⁷

When the logics of musicality as located in the body and the mind failed onlookers’ readings of Wiggins, they instead attributed his abilities to his soul.

As the following chapters demonstrate, these questions about the locus of musical talent have continued to frame debates about musicality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Is music primarily of the body, like an athlete working on their strength, a virtuoso playing difficult scales? Is it primarily an issue of intellect, and therefore an indication of intellectual giftedness as well? Is it isolated in its own mysterious corner of the mind or body? Is musicality a metaphor for some type of deeper inner essence, wisdom, or enlightenment? The following section addresses these same questions from a slightly different analytical vantage point, examining how onlookers understood the relationship between childhood and musical ability.

¹³⁵ “A Black Prodigy in the Musical World: From the Baltimore Patriot.”

¹³⁶ G. S., “The Blind Negro Boy Pianist,” *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, February 11, 1860, 364.

¹³⁷ “The Blind Black Boy Pianist.” James Monroe Trotter pushed back on the idea of Wiggins’ musicality as merely mimetic, commenting also on Wiggins’ soul as an alternative: “Nor does he need to depend upon the music composed by others. His own soul is full of harmony, endless in variety, and most ravishing. Take from him, were it possible, all remembrance of the music written by others, and he would still be an object of delight and amazement on account of his matchless power in improvisation.” In the first years of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois (and other advocates of uplift) took up this strategy for the purposes of uplift in asserting the value located in *The Souls of Black Folk*. James M. Trotter, *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (Johnson Reprint, 1881); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1st Vintage Books/Library of America ed. (New York: Vintage Books/Library of America, 1990).

Child / Prodigy

In the every-day apparent intellect, in reason or judgment, he is but one degree above an idiot,—incapable of comprehending the simplest conversation on ordinary topics, amused or enraged with trifles such as would affect a child of three years old. On the other side, his affections are alive, even vehement, delicate in their instinct as a dog's or an infant's.¹³⁸

Observers of Blind Tom constantly grappled with the relationship between his musical abilities and his “development” more generally, appealing to a variety of conflicting associations between musicality, age, and learning. Here, I explore a contradiction between two frequent characterizations of Wiggins—between denigrating designations of his intellect as childlike and flattering declarations of his precocious musical abilities as evidence of his prodigy. Regardless of an onlooker's stance, the fact of Wiggins' blackness saturated each of these debates over his childness, or childishness, and its relationship to his musicality.¹³⁹ Here, I explore how the racialized spectacle of Wiggins' musical performances challenged both sides of broader contemporary debates over whether the experience of childhood was an essential pathway or a compulsory impediment in the realization of exceptional musical abilities.

These copious discourses were indicative of an age-oriented double-bind that nineteenth-century European Americans imposed onto black people—one which also colored perceptions of broader Western portrayals of musical talent. At different points in his career, Blind Tom was perceived both to be a monstrous child and a childish monster, to employ Markus Bohlmann's and

¹³⁸ Davis, “Blind Tom.”

¹³⁹ Regarding terminology for features and qualities of the child, scholars have employed a number of nouns and adjectives. “Childness,” as Bohlman and Moreland have defined the term, “gestures toward the discursive construction of the child,” separate from age, state, or stage. In my usage of “childish,” I intend to summon the more negative contemporary connotations, with “childlike” taking a more neutral position. Similarly, “childhood” connotes a developmental state or stage that contrasts directly with the stage of adulthood. In employing each of these terms, I aim to mark the ways childhood is variously casted as positive, negative, and attached or detached from one's age. Markus P. J. Bohlmann and Sean Moreland, *Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters: Essays on Cinema's Holy Terrors* (McFarland, 2015), 15.

Sean Moreland's turn of phrase and summon the etymological origins of prodigy.¹⁴⁰ Discourses also persistently characterized his persona both as a "de-childed pickaninny" and a "childlike black adult," a common, racist inversion of discourses about the African American life trajectory that Robin Bernstein has explored in her important work on the racialized history of cultural constructions of childhood.¹⁴¹ Fred Moten has observed the contradictory nature of this contradictory burden of black bodies, which he characterized as experiencing "an extended infantilism despite the fact that there are no children here."¹⁴² In performing virtuosic works and original compositions within the Western art idiom from a young age, Wiggins exposed incongruities in both of these racist stereotypes as well as alarming analogies with cultural archetypes of the precocious musical prodigy and the childlike genius.

In the quotation that opens this section, Rebecca Harding Davis offers some context regarding her subsequent discussion of Blind Tom's musical abilities, describing the nature of his "intellect," "idiocy," "affections," and "instincts"—each of which she represents through childhood-oriented analogies. As discussed earlier, Davis' 1862 piece in the *Atlantic* offers a particularly indulgent characterization of the African American pianist, but this brief summary is nevertheless emblematic of two pervasive nineteenth-century conceptions of the ways musical ability development was perceived through a lens of childness. In the first sentence, Davis describes the pianist's (near) "idiocy" as akin to the intellect of a toddler, conveying the common nineteenth-century definition of idiots as less mentally "developed," or possessing a lower "mental age" than those with an average intellect. In the second sentence, Davis compares Wiggins' "affections" to

¹⁴⁰ While Bohlmann and Moreland's volume explores the intersections between children and monsters mostly through filmic case studies of the twentieth century, the characterization is particularly relevant to the case of a prodigious black child; prodigy derives from the Latin "prodigium," meaning a monster that violates nature, and black bodies—certainly Wiggins—were often perceived both as monstrous (grotesque, unnatural), and as childish (intellectually undeveloped or primitive).

¹⁴¹ Bohlmann and Moreland, *Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters*; Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (NYU Press, 2011), 54.

¹⁴² Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (U of Minnesota Press, 2003), 176.

those of an infant (or an animal), which she connects later in the article to the pianist's "prophetic or historical voice" and his "deaf, uninstructed soul," both of which are responsible for the "peculiar power" of his musical performance.¹⁴³ In other words, Davis's comment invokes childishness as a justification for his so-called limited intellect—an impairment which should preclude him from mastering so complex a task as piano performance—while also crediting his equally childlike affections for the instinctual, innate musicality she deemed so remarkable.

Tensions over childness as either a bane or a boon to one's musical exceptionalism was situated within a larger constellation of shifting nineteenth-century understandings about children's abilities and dis-abilities. Studies of the history of childhood, from Phillippe Aires's 1986 *Centuries of Childhood* to more recent research asserting a less linear (but still shifting) societal treatment of the child, have demonstrated how idealized understandings of children as natural, innocent, and as a population that should be protected and segregated from adults is a relatively recent construct.¹⁴⁴ Importantly, this more exceptionalizing understanding of childness coincided with increasingly prominent discourses about musical prodigies. Aires, who declared the nineteenth century the "apex of childhood," argued that children's essential distinction from adults was perceived through an economic rather than biological lens earlier in the century; power differentials between adults and children were a result of the latter's dependence (because of their inability to perform labor) rather than their being a separate class of persons, as was increasingly the case in the latter half of the century. For this reason and many others, American understandings of children and African Americans became socially constructed in tandem—as dependent, ignorant, and categorically possessing a lower capacity for intellectual complexity. Anna Mae Duane has argued that childhood

¹⁴³ Davis, "Blind Tom."

¹⁴⁴ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (Vintage Books, 1962); for a helpful summary of Ariès' arguments and more contemporary revisions and elaborations on his ideas, see Shauna Vey, *Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre: The Work of the Marsh Troupe of Juvenile Actors* (SIU Press, 2015), 4-5.

was often cited in relation to justifications of enslavement, and therefore, “the definition of childhood itself has been recalibrated in response to slavery’s encroachments.”¹⁴⁵ Jefferson, to summon his influential voice again, famously quipped that freeing a slave would be the equivalent of abandoning a child.¹⁴⁶

In this historical moment, then, a black enslaved child was doubly denied the type of humanity and intellectual independence (not to mention the ability to feel, literally and figuratively) commonly associated with the possession of musical talent.¹⁴⁷ According to this understanding, Blind Tom would be biologically incapable of understanding or creating music. In *The Ladies’ Home Journal* rehearsal of Wiggins’ origin story, for instance, the author portrays the black child as bird-like and dog-like, in his “perching” at the piano and his “unwavering devotion” to it—representing him in a way that animated the uncanniness of the melodies he was said to produce: “From the time when the Bethune family left the dinner-table to see who could be playing on the piano, and discovered the sightless pickaninny of four years perched on the stool, his little hands plucking uncanny melody from the keyboard—from that time until now he has had an unwavering devotion to the instrument whose music is his life.”¹⁴⁸ In this description, even the music does not belong to—is not “possessed” by—the animalistic “pickaninny,” but he rather “plucks” or extracts the melodies from the keyboard. The synecdoche that rendered young Blind Tom’s hands, rather than his mind or his holistic person, as responsible for the “uncanny melody” similarly betrays the

¹⁴⁵ Anna Mae Duane, *Child Slavery before and after Emancipation: An Argument for Child-Centered Slavery Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 6.

¹⁴⁶ Duane, 6. Indeed, similar attitudes were used in support of the notion of the “white man’s burden” in colonial and racially oriented contexts.

¹⁴⁷ Importantly, as Bernstein has discussed, the pickaninny figure was perceived as resistant or immune to sensation, and therefore pain, a discourse that served to justify the cruel treatments directed at black children under slavery. In a musical context, this lack of sensation translates to a lack of musical or aesthetic sensibility, rendering the pickaninny figure categorically unable to understand or generate aesthetic objects—let alone become proficient at the piano. Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*.

¹⁴⁸ John F. Becket, “Blind Tom as He Is To-Day,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal* 15, no. 10 (September 1898): 13.

author's inability to account for the black child's intellectual and emotional state in conjunction with his nascent pianistic abilities.

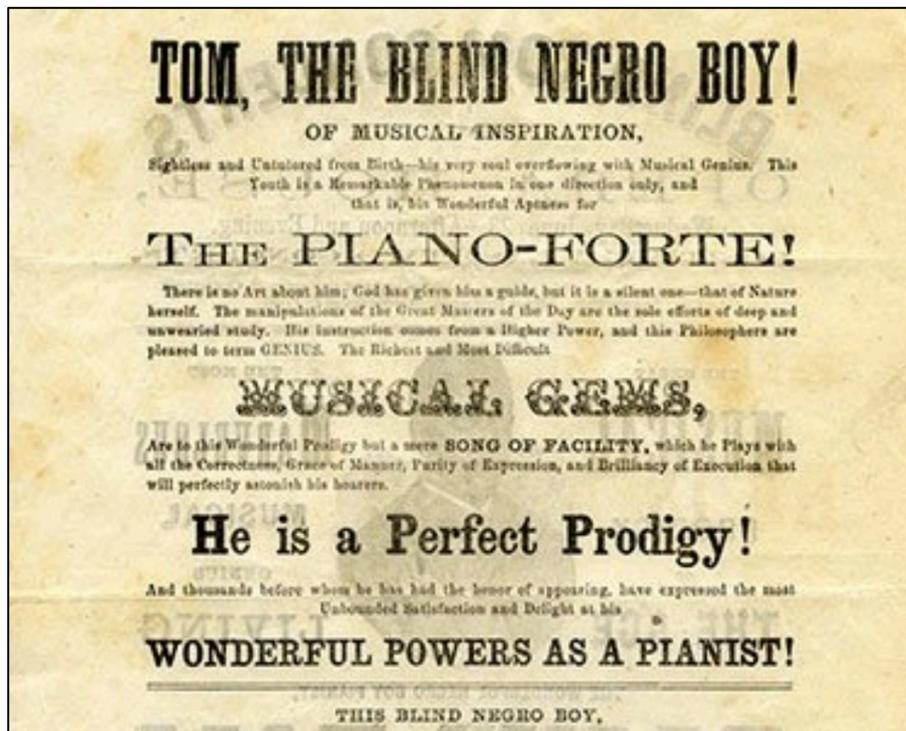


Figure 2.3: Performance program, Springfield, Illinois, 1869 (Columbus Museum).

Thus, while onlookers at first categorized Blind Tom as a “pickaninny,” his musical abilities challenged this simplistic stereotype and pointed instead toward a different childhood-oriented archetype: that of the prodigy (Figure 2.3). Not unlike the ways black bodies were frequently described as monstrous, conceptions of prodigies contained traces of the term’s monstrous etymological origin.¹⁴⁹ As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has argued, unusually formed beings whose bodies seemed at once ordinary and extraordinary had long been deemed monstrous. “Monstrous bodies were a particular type of prodigy—similar to comets and earthquakes—which drew great attention and inspired awe.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed, prodigies and monsters had been associated since the sixteenth century, perhaps since the French surgeon Ambrose Pare published his *Des Monstres et*

¹⁴⁹ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), xvi.

¹⁵⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 164.

Prodigies in 1575, designating monsters as within the bounds of nature and prodigies as entirely outside it—as super-natural.¹⁵¹ These meanings had become intertwined by the nineteenth century, with musical prodigies retaining associations with monstrosity or unnaturalness—an anomaly that resulted in musical powers beyond natural explanation.¹⁵²

Blind Tom’s surprising and precocious abilities allowed his masters and managers to easily market him as a prodigy who possessed innate musical knowledge, as a “freak of nature” appropriate both for concert halls and circus shows, a “lyrical mingling of magic and menace.”¹⁵³ Among others, Rebecca Harding Davis compared Blind Tom to “the infant Mozart,” the prototypical prodigy, suggesting that he had been granted a musical knowledge that could not simply be a result of cultivation due to his young age.¹⁵⁴ As Davis wondered, again portraying Wiggins’ young body as a conduit rather than a creative force, “In what part of the unsightly baby-carcass has been stowed away these old airs, forgotten by every one else, and some of them never heard by the child but once, but which he now reproduced, every note intact?”¹⁵⁵ A writer in 1865 straightforwardly declared (perhaps also suspecting deception in Oliver’s claims that Blind Tom was untaught), “He is literally a musical prodigy—one gifted with a power, the value of which he can scarcely understand, but which he wields with an intelligence which seems rather the result of study than of intuition.”¹⁵⁶ Indeed, though prodigies today are understood in a more educationally-oriented light, as young

¹⁵¹ Alan W. Bates, *Emblematic Monsters: Unnatural Conceptions and Deformed Births in Early Modern Europe* (Rodopi, 2005), 13. As French physician Bouchard (quoted in Bates) characterized monstrous children in the late seventeenth century, “A monster is anything that appears outside the usual course and order of nature, such as a child with two heads, or which has three or more arms or other superfluous members, mutilated or maimed. A prodigy is that which goes totally against nature, such as if a woman gives birth to a best, weather four-footed, aquatic, flying, reptilian, or of some other kind.”

¹⁵² Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, 125. As Straus has observed, “When unusual musical abilities become apparent in a young child, we call him or her a ‘prodigy,’ suggesting both the rarity of the gift as well as its affinity with monstrosity—a shocking deviation from normative embodiment.”

¹⁵³ Bohlmann and Moreland, *Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters*, 10.

¹⁵⁴ Rachel Cowgill, “Proofs of Genius”: *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and the Construction of Musical Prodigies in Early Georgian London* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁵⁵ Davis, “Blind Tom.” Of course, not all reviewers agreed with Davis’ illusion to Mozart. As Wiesel retorted, “musically ignorant authoress of the sketch in question, evidently knows not what she says, when she compares this boy with young Mozart.”

¹⁵⁶ “At The Academy of Music: Blind Tom’s Concerts.”

people who are unusually adept at learning particular skills, the type of knowledge assigned to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prodigies was more innate. As one writer put it, “all the education and effort in cristendom could not produce his equal.”¹⁵⁷

Though the Blind Tom was consistently characterized according to some mixture of the adultish prodigy and “de-childed pickaninny” archetypes during his youth, upon crossing the threshold into adulthood, discourses describing him as a “childlike adult” became increasingly prominent. As an author for the *Coconino Sun* remarked, “through his life, Blind Tom, as I have said, was a child—spoke of himself, as children often do, in the third person. He was childlike in his affections, childlike in his disposition, childlike in his requirements, childlike in the way in which he understood things. That was the negro—the undeveloped negro. But when it came to music there he was the [ripened] advanced intelligence.”¹⁵⁸ Or, as Willa Cather put it, “He has a marvelous ear and wonderful delicacy of touch, but these gifts are shut up in the body of an overgrown child.”¹⁵⁹ Even Wiggins’ most recent biographer, Dierdre O’Connell, described him as living “in a protracted infancy.”¹⁶⁰ The pianist’s (likely) autism was undoubtedly responsible in part for these descriptions, but it is perhaps more remarkable that his many mannerisms, typical of autistic people (and likely exaggerated by his managers’ intentional lack of tuition in order to cultivate a freakish and “idiotic” persona), were read simply as typical of his race. In other words, Wiggins’ cognitive atypicality served only as an exaggeration of pre-existing stereotypes of simplistic, idiotic black adults. A writer for the *Albany Argus* vividly described him as

A wild, uncouth figure, angular at all points which should be curved, and curved at all points that should present acute lines—loose-jointed, close-wooled, thick-lipped, sprawl-footed, with forehead almost covered with kinky locks, eye-balls prominent and distended, and an idiotic, staring expression of countenance—in short, a regular

¹⁵⁷ Willie Lighthouse, “Letter from Willie Lighthouse,” *Yorkville Inquirer*, June 16, 1860.

¹⁵⁸ “‘Blind Tom’ Dead. Singular Old Negro Pianist of Marvelous Musical Powers Passes in Sixtieth Year.,” *The Coconino Sun*, July 10, 1908, sec. Page 3.

¹⁵⁹ Cather, *The World and the Parish*, 165.

¹⁶⁰ O’Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 35.

specimen of the African in his unadulterated and barbarous condition, before he has been elevated by the influence of social surroundings or Caucasian infusion.¹⁶¹

Such descriptions were reminiscent of a different “thick-lipped, sprawl-footed” Tom, whose name had already become synonymous with stereotypes of the simple, childlike black adult by Wiggins’ lifetime.¹⁶² Harriet Beecher Stowe famously described Uncle Tom, as possessing “truly African features” and a “childlike simplicity of affection,” whose expression was “united with a confiding and humble simplicity.”¹⁶³ Similar imagery pervaded descriptions of a teenage and adult Wiggins, whose “idiocy” was interpreted merely as an exaggerated version of the condition of the Uncle Tom stereotype, and African American intellectual capabilities more broadly.

These conflations of Wiggins’ blackness and idiocy also point to the ways “mental development” itself was being conceived in relation to musical ability. Over the course of Wiggins’ career, the concept of idiocy, which conflated a number of ambiguously understood intellectual disabilities, gained increasing currency in Anglophone scientific and cultural discourses. In 1846, three years before Wiggins’ birth, prominent educator and researcher of cognitive impairment Eduard Seguin proposed two categories, *l'idiotie profonde* and *l'idiotie superficielle*.¹⁶⁴ Two years later, American Samuel Gridley Howe proposed a new triad of “pure idiots,” “fools,” and “simpletons.”¹⁶⁵ And by 1866, the midst of the most eventful stage of Blind Tom’s career, several increasingly precise designations of idiocy had been declared—by psychologists Duncan and Millard, and by John Langdon Down, who introduced six “ethnic” classifications of idiocy.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, it was in 1866 that an anonymous doctor marveled over Wiggins’ “remarkable” combination of idiocy and musicality in

¹⁶¹ *The Marvelous Musical Prodigy, Blind Tom*.

¹⁶² Duane, *Child Slavery before and after Emancipation*, 6.

¹⁶³ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (J. Cassell, 1852), 18.

¹⁶⁴ The difference between these two categories was generally understood as one of degree, not kind. Edward Seguin, *Traitement moral, hygiène et éducation des idiots et des autres enfants arriérés* (J.B. Baillière, 1846).

¹⁶⁵ Patrick McDonagh, *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool University Press, 2008), 2.

¹⁶⁶ McDonagh, 2.

an editorial for *The Musical World*: “The boy, who is not only blind but completely and unmistakably idiotic, executes difficult music with a facility that under the circumstances is remarkable.”¹⁶⁷ And following an increasingly robust body of scholarship on the subject, psychologist Henry Goddard proposed a system that classified intellectual disability according to the increasingly sanctioned Intelligence Quotient, which had been developed by Binet and Simon in the first years of the twentieth century to measure an individual’s “mental age.”¹⁶⁸ According to Goddard’s specifications, an idiot possessed an IQ of 0-25, an imbecile of 26-50, and a moron of 51-70.¹⁶⁹

These nineteenth-century classifications and descriptions of idiocy, then, sketched out a teleological mental development—mental age—from an individual’s birth until adulthood. Seguin, who remained an authoritative voice on idiocy for the remainder of the nineteenth century, was particularly interested in the relationship between idiocy and musicality, coining the concept of the “idiot savant” in 1870.¹⁷⁰ As Seguin noted, “Among the wealthier classes, idiocy is [...] complicated with abnormal semi-capacities or disordered instincts, which produce heterogeneous types to an almost unlimited extent. It is from this class, almost exclusively, that we have musical, mathematical, architectural, and other varieties of the *idiot savant*; the useless protrusion of a single faculty, accompanied by a woeful general impotence.”¹⁷¹ Further, Seguin believed that all idiots were, as James Trent put it, “gifted with a musical faculty,” even if their intellects were otherwise undeveloped—not unlike the ways African Americans had been characterized as early as Jefferson’s

¹⁶⁷ D.E.F. Keys (M.D.), “Rational Recreation: Letters to Well-Known Characters, To J. V. Bridgeman, Esq.”

¹⁶⁸ Steven Noll and James Trent, *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader* (NYU Press, 2004), 10. While there are a number of other researchers and scholars who contributed to the development of mental age and intelligence quotients as theoretical and practical systems,

¹⁶⁹ Jan Branson and Don Miller, *Damned for Their Difference: The Cultural Construction of Deaf People as “Disabled”*: *A Sociological History* (Gallaudet University Press, 2002), 49.

¹⁷⁰ Straus, “Idiots Savants, Retarded Savants, Talented Aments, Mono-Savants, Autistic Savants, Just Plain Savants, People with Savant Syndrome, and Autistic People Who Are Good at Things.”

¹⁷¹ E. C Seguin, *New Facts and Remarks Concerning Idiocy* (Wm. Wood & Company, 1870). Emphasis added.

writing.¹⁷² As he remarked on the topic of musicality, “Some very stupid idiots can sing correctly, and detect a false note instantly.”¹⁷³ Seguin even included a section on Blind Tom in his treatise,

Some Facts and Remarks Concerning Idiocy, worth quoting at length:

Now the question arises—if he [Blind Tom] can be elevated above his idiotic condition, will he, at the same time that he gains so many new perceptions, lose the acuteness of his musical sense; exchanging, if we may so express our idea of a mental revolution, his artistic genius against an even general common sense? [...] Is the loss of the special gift the rule when education equally embarrasses all the modes of activity? Or does forcing in education require a more rigid conformity to physiological laws than was likely used in the two cases? A few more subjects, nicely treated and followed up, will settle that question, important to the whole race.

This line of questioning Seguin lays out here points to an intimate overlap between constructions of idiocy and of genius—not to mention African American mental “development”—each of which were variously characterized as childlike. Indeed, geniuses and children had coexisted as ideological bedfellows since well before Schopenhauer’s famous declaration that a genius was essentially childlike in retaining a dominance of the intellect over the will.¹⁷⁴ As Schopenhauer succinctly put it, “Every child is in a way a genius; and every genius is in a way a child.”¹⁷⁵ Indeed, Wiggins’ pianistic abilities and staged antics overwhelmingly fulfilled these understandings of the childlike musical genius. Some particularly activist observers tried to reinscribe this Schopenhauerian logic in the context of Wiggins’ abilities. As one reporter declared in 1867, “It must therefore be assumed that this negro lad is really endowed with the most extraordinary powers, of a particular kind, affording another proof that the phenomena of genius are not confined to the Caucasian race.”¹⁷⁶ James

¹⁷² James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 42.

¹⁷³ Seguin, *New Facts and Remarks Concerning Idiocy*.

¹⁷⁴ Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed*, 75. As Simon Keefe pointed out about the case of Mozart’s eternal childishness, it was a concept that dated “back to Aristotle in classical antiquity, according to which the imagination is a lower, subrational faculty of the soul. This suited his story of Mozart as an eternal child, with deep character flaws. Friedrich Schiller’s highly influential distinction between naïve and sentimental artists fed into this theme, enabling subsequent biographers to construct a naïve, childlike, perhaps childish composer who composed without reflection.” Simon P. Keefe, *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 207.

¹⁷⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (Courier Corporation, 2012), 395.

¹⁷⁶ “Blind Tom, the Negro Pianist.”

Monroe Trotter, an African American scholar and influential early advocate of music-oriented racial uplift ideology, also insisted that onlookers recognize Wiggins' idiosyncratic performances as evidence of his genius: "Some persons, it is true, judging from certain manifestations of his, or from certain lack of manifestations, have had the temerity to say that 'Blind Tom' is an idiot. Out with the idea! [...] Let us call him the embodiment, the soul, of music, and there rest our investigations; for all else is futility, all else is vain speculation." Indeed, each of these constructed archetypes—musical prodigy, genius, idiocy—were employed to isolate and insulate musicality from other intellectual abilities, identifying music-making as occupying a different mental space (as phrenologists called it, an "organ") ostensibly located more in the soul than the mind. The type of naturalized musicality attributed to Wiggins was typical of these archetypes, which granted onlookers a number of options to categorize him within their contemporary discursive frameworks.

Childishness was not only a quality lobbied against Wiggins: more skeptical onlookers accused those who uncritically believed claims of Blind Tom's "powers" of being childish, as well. In his campaign against audiences' sustained belief in spiritualism and other forms of "real" magic, the influential illusionist Harry Houdini specifically mentioned Blind Tom as an example of someone who perpetuated such myths, characterizing his audiences' credulousness as childlike: "I am not willing to be deluded by the fraudulent impositions of so-called psychics, or accept as sacred reality any of the evidence that has been placed before me thus far. The ancients' childish belief in demonology and witchcraft; the superstitions of the civilized and uncivilized, and those marvelous mysteries of past ages are all laughed at by the full grown sense of the present generation." As Houdini attested, those who accepted that "psychic frauds" like Wiggins were genuine recipients of magical powers beyond the human or scientific realm were psychologically mired in a childish, less teleologically informed past. In the following section, we turn to this very tension: between those

who received Blind Tom as an entertaining illusionist and those that received him as a genuinely supernatural being.

Magic / Illusion

[T]o give in writing anything like an accurate description of him is utterly impossible. The fingers fly over the keyboard, and he seems like one possessed. Did not Shakespeare conceive this being when he describes Caliban being touched with the magical sounds heard in Prosperous Island?¹⁷⁷

In the copious writing that deliberated on the “nature” of Blind Tom’s musical abilities, the pianist was not only described as “naturally” gifted and “unnaturally” monstrous; he was believed by other sources to possess supernatural powers—not least because of his tendency to be announced as dead and to miraculously rise again for encore performances, as the beginning of this chapter discussed. However writers characterized Blind Tom, they frequently summoned magical language. Sometimes this magical language was merely metaphorical—a testament to the phenomenological and affective similarities between the experiences of witnessing Blind Tom’s musical performances and displays of magic.¹⁷⁸ Just as often, however, mentions of magic, powers, and conjuring were intended as an earnest explanation for Wiggins’ surprising musical abilities.¹⁷⁹ Onlookers deliberated widely: was Blind Tom another entertaining but ultimately deceptive example of secular magic, of “illusions understood as illusions?”¹⁸⁰ Or was he genuinely enchanted—endowed with that real “thing” that inexplicable gift of musical talent that eluded any other explanation? Or as Henry Watterson, whose words opened this chapter, asked, “Yes, it was memory without doubt; but what *else*? Whence the hand power that enabled him to manipulate the keys, the vocal power that enabled

¹⁷⁷ From the *Manchester Guardian*, September 23, 1866, as quoted in *The Marvelous Musical Prodigy, Blind Tom*.

¹⁷⁸ While discourses referred to a diverse constellation of meanings in mentions of magic, my own use of the term aligns with Coppa, Hass, and Peck, who defined it simply as “the artful performance of impossible effects.” L. Hass, F. Coppa, and J. Peck, *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Springer, 2008), 8.

¹⁷⁹ As Stephen Michael Best put it, “A single question piqued the interest of both expert and audience... what ‘magic’ propels his artistic performance?” Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties*, 56.

¹⁸⁰ Karl Bell, *The Magical Imagination: Magic and Modernity in Urban England, 1780-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 90. “Magic assemblage,” as I discuss further below, is a term that

him to imitate the voice?”¹⁸¹ For many nineteenth-century audience members, Blind Tom’s summoning of musical “powers” on stage was akin to the performance of a nineteenth-century magician. As with the diverse assemblage of entertainment formats that included magic during Wiggins’ lifetime, there was meaningful slippage between receptions of Wiggins’ talent as stage magic, or magic that was staged.

The above reference to Shakespeare’s character Caliban—a half-human and half-monster forced into servitude despite his participation in a magical (and very musical) world—is an apropos illustration of the ways Blind Tom’s musicality was received. Caliban has been notoriously and widely interpreted in productions of *The Tempest* (not to mention in the vast body of fictional and scholarly literature about him); sometimes he appears a human with magical and musical powers, sometimes as any number of animal or semi-human “beasts” sensitive to sound in a more primitive, if noble, way.¹⁸² Reminiscent of Caliban’s well-known song, “Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments/Will hum about mine ears,” Blind Tom also sang of the affecting sounds he heard in his head, “I sink and I rise with its cadence and swell/while it touches my heart with its deep thrilling strain.”¹⁸³ Despite Thomas Wiggins’ own partially acknowledged human subjectivity—whether he was dubbed an ape, a parrot, a dog, a monster, a child, or a Caliban-esque figure—the question of his musicality’s source loomed in discourses about him. Just as true *Werktreue* performers displayed outer evidence of a transformative inner experience as they performed, Wiggins’ dramatic antics suggested a tumultuous inner musical world which many thought to be of paranormal origin.

¹⁸¹ Watterson, “Blind Tom.”

¹⁸² Nadia Lie and Theo d’Haen, *Constellation Caliban: Figurations of a Character* (Rodopi, 1997), i. As Lie remarked on this vast body of literature parsing Caliban’s meanings and identity, “a whole new discipline seems to have emerged: Calibanology.”

¹⁸³ Baron, *Stress and Coping in Autism*, 116. This song, published in the *Marvelous Musical Prodigy* pamphlet, among many other news publications throughout Wiggins’ career, was a staple of Blind Tom’s shows. Incorrectly attributed to Blind Tom as its author, Baron notes that the song was written some years before he was born and intentionally added to his performance repertoire.

Blind Tom's musical talent was positioned and received as a musical iteration of what Simon During has dubbed as the "magic assemblage" of late nineteenth century: a "variety of attractions and performances, fictive and nonfictive, mimetic and nonmimetic, active or passive, visceral or intellectual" which involved some performance of magic.¹⁸⁴ As mentioned above, Perry Oliver utilized a number of proven formulas in his promotional materials for the young pianist, drawing upon strategies employed by increasingly popular magic, circus, and freak show acts.¹⁸⁵ The "tricks" Blind Tom performed to display his "powers" of musical talent—seemingly psychically summoning the *secondo* parts to a previously unheard melody, playing pieces backwards or forwards, with either hand playing either part—were not unlike the *legerdemain* performed by magicians that often accompanied more substantial, potentially genuine magical presentations (in Wiggins' case, the virtuosic musical works of revered composers). As Mark Twain described one of these tricks, in which Blind Tom performed three different songs simultaneously, "It was a dreadful and disorganizing mixture of meaningless sounds, but you could easily discover that there was 'no deception,' as the magicians say, by taking up the tunes one at a time and following them a little while, and then you would perceive that in time, movement and melody, each was without fault."¹⁸⁶ Some onlookers specifically referenced the type of conjuring Oliver and others had intended to emulate with Blind Tom's displays of talent. As a self-identified "spiritualist" wrote in *Dwight's*,

We find sufficient remaining to excite our wonder, and naturally ask how we are to account for such a manifestation. My belief has been from the first, that he is one of those beings of whom there are now very many among us—subject to possession by influences from the other world. [...] In fact, physical manifestations are so common, that I can only wonder that this case has not already been classed among them, as I am sure it will be hereafter.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Simon During, *Modern Enchantments* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 66.

¹⁸⁵ O'Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 75.

¹⁸⁶ Twain, "Letter from Mark Twain: Blind Tom and His Performances."

¹⁸⁷ W., "From a Spiritualist, Boston, Nov. 13, 1862," *Dwight's Journal of Music* 21 (November 22, 1862): 267–68.

Wiggins was indeed regularly “classed” as such from that point onwards. To offer an example that bookends his career, announcements and reviews of his appearances on vaudeville stages in the first years of the new century repeated dubbed him the “Black Wizard of the Keyboard,” assuring audiences that his “musical powers seem to have improved rather than otherwise.”¹⁸⁸

Blind Tom’s participation this magical assemblage extended into the freak show and circus discourses his managers deployed in his publicity. Referencing the false promises of famous showman P. T. Barnum, one unimpressed writer dubbed Blind Tom’s performances to be “a fine specimen of the richest Barnumesque.”¹⁸⁹ And indeed, as Dierdre O’Connell has written, Barnum served specifically as a “role model” and resource for Perry Oliver during his formative tours with the young pianist.¹⁹⁰ The parallels were not simply in style, but in content; Oliver and Barnum both purposefully capitalized upon a collection of nineteenth-century curiosities around race, intellect, and musicality.¹⁹¹

In Figure 2.4, for example, Barnum presented a figure he called “What is it?” as a primitive, missing link between ape and modern man who was supposedly trapped and brought back from Africa.¹⁹² In reality, however, the character was simply an African American man named William Henry Johnson from New Jersey, the child of two former slaves. Not unlike Blind Tom, Johnson’s voice was suppressed (literally as well as figuratively: Barnum paid him not to speak while he was being displayed in a cage and wearing a fur suit) and his cognitive abilities were downplayed. Johnson even acquired a violin he reportedly adored. According to reports, Johnson was known for

¹⁸⁸ “‘Blind Tom’ at the Orpheum,” December 27, 1903; “‘Blind Tom’ Makes a Reappearance: Many Times Reported Dead, but the Old Man Turns Up at the Circle Theatre,” *New York Herald*, January 12, 1904.

¹⁸⁹ F., “More about Tom.”

¹⁹⁰ O’Connell, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, 75.

¹⁹¹ Rebecca Harding Davis noted this overlap, as well: “An exhibition which comes before us with such a tale presents surely a prima facie claim to be classed with such vulgar wonders as Joyce Heth, the Mermaid, and the What-is-it. Yet the greatest imposture often has a nucleus of fact, it may be well enough be that this young Mozart has his real talents, if we could only find them out.” Davis, “Blind Tom.”

¹⁹² Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (University of Chicago Press, 1990).

playing his violin without any skill or musical sensibility; audience members were even prompted to offer him money to stop playing.¹⁹³ While Johnson’s lack of violinistic talent was consonant with contemporary understandings, Wiggins’ virtuosic musicianship appeared as an unexpected unnatural or supernatural anomaly, not unlike freak show performers born with an extra limb or who grew to be eight feet tall.



Figure 2.4: Circus Poster: “What is It?” Lithograph by Currier & Ives, c. 1860.

Throughout the late nineteenth century, the “thing” commonly called magic—not unlike musical talent—essentially served as a floating signifier for sundry phenomena derived from a range of belief systems and cultural traditions. This fluidity between understandings of magic enabled the American explosion of magic shows, seances, freak shows, psychic readings, everyday legerdemain,

¹⁹³ Marc Hartzman, *American Sideshow: An Encyclopedia of History’s Most Wondrous and Curiously Strange Performers* (Penguin, 2006).

and other uncanny or technologically enhanced staged spectacles during Wiggins' lifetime. During this era, participants in the magic assemblage were actively cultivating a hybrid culture around magic and illusion that elaborated and capitalized upon magic's conceptual ambiguity and turned the act of displaying it into a performance art unto itself. Much like the two performative guises of authenticity and virtuosity discussed by Leistra-Jones and in the previous section, nineteenth-century performers of magic explored modes of presentation that either exploited beliefs in an elusive, invisible, "real and potent" magic or displayed technologically impressive feats of illusion.¹⁹⁴ As an article in the monthly bulletin for the Society of American Magicians advised, as soon as the magician "casts off his own personality (forgets that he is before the audience in person) and actually plays the part of a miracle worker, with full assurance and confidence in his own power and ability for so doing," he will find success with his audiences.¹⁹⁵ Wiggins achieved this type of success, both in his immersive behavior and in the techn(ological) displays of the magic of his musical talent.

I have already discussed some of the ways Blind Tom was likened to a phonograph, an automaton, and an otherwise mechanistic creature seemingly activated by musical sounds. It is important to note, however, that discourses of magic and science were often treated interchangeably, as two sides of a coin of astounding achievement of the previously unimaginable. In many ways, magic was scientific and science was magical, and the contexts in which nineteenth-century audiences explored their beliefs about both were fluid and interchangeable, only reinforcing the magical undertones of the Blind Tom performances received as some combination of freak show, minstrel show, classical concert, and magical display. During offers a good example of such overlap:

¹⁹⁴ Chris Goto-Jones, *Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 38.

¹⁹⁵ Oscar Teale, "Aesthetic Magic," *Magic, Unity, Might: Society of American Magicians Monthly*, February 1918. While this article was written a decade after Wiggins' death, I came upon its discussion of magical performance practice because it devotes a long middle section to a discussion of Blind Tom as an exemplar of extraordinary natural aptitude for performance. This section on Wiggins largely reads as a non-sequitur, but I suspect it was included as a genuine example of the type of "aesthetic magic" that magicians were meant to imitate.

“an ambiguously fictional performance of mental magic on a music hall stage might become a serious scientific experiment in psychic research; furthermore, scientific interest in such magic could be fed back into and exploited within the magic assemblage.”¹⁹⁶ Beginning around the time of Blind Tom’s first musical tours, the popular science periodical *Scientific American* even “featured regular articles on the demystification of magicians’ illusions alongside reviews of technological innovations in, for example, the automobile, railroad, and aeronautics industries.”¹⁹⁷

Music (along with its magic) was also beginning to be interrogated and received according to increasingly scientific terms, to become increasingly disenchanting—whether it was through the phonograph’s capturing of previously ephemeral sound, Galton’s exploration of the biological origins of musical genius, or studies by educational psychologists developing increasingly specific tests to identify musical potential. Musicians and musical productions also appealed to some imbrication of magical and scientific forces. Niccolò Paganini, to offer one popular example, credited his violin (and, at other times, himself) with not only magical but literal power, stating, “The electricity that I feel in dealing with the magical harmony harms me horribly.”¹⁹⁸ As one article from 1917 summarized his career, “with that magic violin he conquered Europe.”¹⁹⁹

I hope this section has shown how magical discourses informed understandings of Blind Tom’s talent on dual registers.²⁰⁰ First, the discourses used to promote and process his “powers” were influenced by the increasingly popular magical assemblage in which Blind Tom participated and passed through as a performer. Secondly, Wiggins’ musical talent itself, and indeed, all musical talent, was not only akin to magic, and presented using the same tricks and techniques as

¹⁹⁶ During, *Modern Enchantments*, 71.

¹⁹⁷ Colin Williamson, *Hidden in Plain Sight: An Archaeology of Magic and the Cinema* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 42.

¹⁹⁸ Quoted in Mai Kawabata, *Paganini: The “demonic” Virtuoso* (Boydell Press, 2013), 41.

¹⁹⁹ W. C. Honeyman, “Real Violin Romances: Paganini’s Magical Guarnerius,” *The Lotus Magazine* 9, no. 2 (1917): 87.

²⁰⁰ For a nuanced discussion of the musical as magical and its function in American modernist consciousness, see Zachary Loeffler, “Speaking of Magic: Enchantment and Disenchantment in Music’s Modernist Ordinary” (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 2018).

musicians—it was seen as *genuinely* magical. Just as many onlookers doubted the myths about the “discovery” of Blind Tom’s talent, there were also ample skeptics regarding the pianist’s magical and technological powers. Harry Houdini described Blind Tom as one of many perpetrators of “psychic fraud” in his book, *A Magician Among the Spirits*.²⁰¹ However, Houdini and others, like H.J. Wiesel and Blind Tom’s many anonymous detractors discussed above, were not simply aiming to disenchant the pianist’s musical displays. Their discourses provide evidence of efforts to retain a broader and more enduring enchantment.²⁰² They strove not to dispel the magical nature of musical talent and genius and giftedness, but to retain it as truly exceptional.

Conclusion

Through parsing the profusion of discourse that followed Thomas Wiggins throughout his long career, this chapter has examined five conceptual tensions that framed nineteenth-century conceptions of musical talent—tensions that remained influential in the twentieth century, as the subsequent two chapters will illustrate. Though they deal with different paradigms of blackness and musicality, each of these sections are variations on a theme: namely, that the complex and cognitively dissonant spectacles of Blind Tom’s performances not only provoked reactions that revealed the ways musical talent was being constructed during this era; his performances also challenged these constructions and their racial underpinnings, exposing chinks in the ideological armor that served to fortify the color line during this tumultuous post-bellum period.²⁰³ Together, these sections have illuminated the diversity of ways that Blind Tom’s performances pushed back on racialized nineteenth century constructions of musicality.

²⁰¹ Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among The Spirits*, 1924, <http://archive.org/details/1924HoudiniAMagicianAmongTheSpirits>.

²⁰² Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” in *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, ed. Jeremy Coote (Clarendon Press, 1994).

²⁰³ Demetrius L. Eudell, *The Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003). As Eudell and others have noted, racial subordination only became more ideologically fraught following emancipation,

As W.E.B. Du Bois famously predicted at the turn of the century, just a few years before Wiggins' (actual) death, "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line."²⁰⁴ While Du Bois' declaration has proved accurate in countless ways—evidenced in part by the number of times this quotation reappears in the literature—it is highly relevant to constructions of musical talent, as well. The heritability of musicality, introduced into scientific discourses by Galton, was widely accepted throughout the majority of the twentieth century and understood along racial lines. As the eugenicist and music psychologist Carl Seashore declared in 1915, "Not only is the gift of music itself inborn, but it is inborn in specific types. These types can be detected early in life, before time for beginning serious musical education."²⁰⁵ Indeed, the inferior "types" of musical talent generally assigned to African American bodies—designations that solidified well before the turn of the century, as Radano and others have argued—remained uncomfortably intertwined with understandings of musicality as an ostensibly universal and generalizable concept, even despite racist test rubrics like Seashore's and hugely segregated access to the type of Eurocentric musical training that equipped students with the musical skills subsequently interpreted as indications of "potential."²⁰⁶ Continuing confusion and controversy over the meaning and significance of musical talent accompanied its increased separation from other aptitudes in school systems and elsewhere, with educators and researchers focusing instead on newly particularized definitions of intelligence that researchers like Louis Terman were investigating as support for ideologies of essential racial difference.²⁰⁷ Recognizing the manifold contradictions in logics of talent discussed throughout this

²⁰⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Pan-African Association. To the Nations of the World," 1900, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

²⁰⁵ Seashore, *The Psychology of Musical Talent*.

²⁰⁶ For example, one researcher in 1928, using the Seashore measures of musical talent, expressed his puzzlement after his aptitude tests did not find the differences he expected between black and white students. He commented, for instance, "Rhythm is supposed to be the Negro's 'long suit.' It may surprise some to learn that the Negroes whom I tested did not show a clear superiority over the whites in the sense of rhythm." Yale S. Nathanson, "The Musical Ability of the Negro," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140, no. 1 (November 1, 1928): 186–90.

²⁰⁷ As Terman noted after testing "Spanish-Indian and Mexican" as well as African American people, "High-grade or border-line deficiency [...] is very, very common among Spanish-Indian and Mexican families of the Southwest and also

dissertation, Du Bois himself returned to talent as an essential philosophical component of his racial uplift strategy—not only in his concept of the Talented Tenth, but in his assertion that black musicality was one of the most irrefutable proofs of the “potential” of his race.²⁰⁸

While this chapter has not aimed to estimate how extensively Thomas Wiggins single-handedly disturbed and complicated late nineteenth-century constructions of black musical and intellectual inferiority, he undoubtedly served as a powerful counter-example for onlookers questioning the musical possibilities of African Americans at the turn of the century. As James Monroe Trotter suggested in 1878, using Wiggins as an example, “Perhaps a proper study of the case of this lad might show to what extent all [...] might be educated through music. It is certainly [musical skills] alone that can be most easily developed; probably the highest and best emotions might be thus permanently excited within him, while the desire for those pleasures leads him to put forth intellectual efforts that nothing else can.”²⁰⁹ Despite the time that has elapsed since Trotter’s intervention into racialized myths of musicality, the five talent-related tensions discussed in this chapter have not disappeared or even dissipated considerably in American musical discourses. In this 2002 entry from a book for mainstream classical music audiences, for example, we can see that the meanings of talent with which nineteenth-century audiences engaged are still common in contemporary contexts:

It is likely that the more *eccentric* part of Blind Tom’s presentation was pure showmanship, coached by money-minded managers who had toured him through Europe claiming that his *talent* came from some *magical* source. The simple truth was that Bethune, who was born a slave in 1849, was a professional—a *naturally gifted musician* and a capable composer. Some saw beyond the ruse to his greater *gifts*. One

among negroes. Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come. [...] Children of this group should be segregated into separate classes. [...] They cannot master abstractions but they can often be made into efficient workers [...] from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding.” Lewis Madison Terman, *The Measurement of Intelligence: An Explanation of and a Complete Guide for the Use of the Stanford Revision and Extension of the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale* (Houghton Mifflin, 1916). 91-92.

²⁰⁸ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (UNC Press Books, 2012), 185.

²⁰⁹ Trotter, *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, 151.

of them was the American piano manufacturer who gave the boy a grand piano bearing the inscription: “A tribute to *true genius*.”²¹⁰

I have italicized the words that Gilliland, a classical music writer for National Public Radio and elsewhere, chose to recount in his brief description of Wiggins—as he put it, the “simple truth” about Blind Tom’s musical abilities.

Wiggins was both an extraordinarily unique case and a kaleidoscope for much more broadly disbursed discursive struggles over musicality that were raging across the United States. Amiri Baraka argued, for example, that “Blind Tom is perhaps a metaphor not only for Afro-American Artists but for the creative forces of any oppressed people, whose state, if they are truly a reflection of their culture, must exist as a more remarked-upon replication of that whole people.”²¹¹ Terry Rowden saw Wiggins as the first in a long line of blind and visually African American musicians whose stories “have mirrored the changes in America’s image of African Americans and the social possibilities of the black community over the last 150 years.” And Geneva Southall reminded her readers that the many chapters of Wiggins’ life were historically instructive on a broader level, noting, “Considering that Blind Tom’s life encompassed the political years of 14 American presidents (Zachary Taylor through Theodore Roosevelt), his life story offers some insight into the musical, historical, and sociopolitical climate of nineteenth-century America.”²¹²

This chapter has focused on the ways musical talent was presented and perceived during Wiggins’ lifetime, but the same stages that hosted Blind Tom’s shows were being used for local amateur nights and vaudeville productions, the ancestors of the talent show genres examined in the following chapter—to the same types of audiences whose voices populated this chapter. Further, the same brand of fact-manipulating and sensationalist tactics that Bethune, Oliver, and others utilized

²¹⁰ Norman Gilliland, *Grace Notes for a Year: Stories of Hope, Humor & Hubris from the World of Classical Music* (NEMO Productions, 2002), 166.

²¹¹ Amiri Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (University of California Press, 2009), 227.

²¹² Southall, *Blind Tom, the Black Pianist-Composer (1849-1908)*, 170.

in their invention and presentation of Blind Tom were used and further developed over the course of the twentieth century. I noted at the beginning of this chapter that discourses about Wiggins chronically blurred fact and fiction; indeed, such blurring has only become more normalized in contemporary reality television contexts. As Amanda McClain observed, “In reality TV, ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ are constantly being negotiated. What audiences understand to be real or not is continually being reconstructed.”²¹³ Not unlike the evolving strategies of Blind Tom’s masters and managers that actively engaged with audiences’ fears, fantasies, and racist preconceptions, the three television shows examined in the following chapter are intended to reflect and provoke viewers’ belief systems around musical ability. As McClain put it, “‘Reality’ is open to interpretation and is constantly adapting. As audiences became more familiar with reality TV formats, the programs become increasingly more intertextual, creating a reversionary cycle of understanding.”²¹⁴

In many ways, then, the following chapter picks up where this one has left off, if from a slightly different vantage point, beginning with a history of the talent show genre that traces its evolution as a mechanism of an increasingly technologically mediated culture industry. Indeed, naturalized American discourses about the floating signifiers of race, socioeconomic class, and disability remain intertwined with conceptions of musical talent. Just as twenty-first talent competition shows represent disability and adversity as inextricable from contestants’ possession of musical talent, Blind Tom’s blindness was perceived as essential to his seeming musical superpowers, as further proof that his ability was magical and innate. In the diversely contentious receptions of Thomas Wiggins as well as the discourses of twenty-first century talent shows, musical talent endures as a locus of struggle, a slippery site of meaning-making. And for Wiggins and talent show contestants alike, declarations about their musical talent serve as evidence of larger agendas. They

²¹³ Amanda Scheiner McClain, *American Ideal: How American Idol Constructs Celebrity, Collective Identity, and American Discourses* (Lexington Books, 2011), 2.

²¹⁴ McClain, 2.

are statements about whose abilities are respected, whose possibilities are recognized, and, occasionally, opportunities for resistance and redefinition.

III. Representing Talent: Reality Television and Discourses of Musical Ability



Figure 3.1: Adrian Romoff in America's Got Talent.

Introduction

Adrian Romoff is nine years old and plays the piano. Standing on the luminous stage of *America's Got Talent* in a bowtie and wire-rimmed glasses, he proclaims to the panel of celebrity judges that he has skipped five grades and often forgets to look at the clock when he practices. After the program's customary pre-audition banter concludes, Romoff takes a seat at the keyboard, ceremonially removes his spectacles, and dives into the familiar introductory flourish of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee" with an added keyboard effect reminiscent of a distorted guitar.¹ The boy seems to become possessed by the song's virtuosic energy, knocking over the piano bench as he jumps up and down and head-bangs like a heavy-metal rocker, occasionally fixing his gaze on the audience. His right hand never misses a beat; his left hand manages once to escape the quick bass line progression and extend directly upwards, as though he were riding a roller coaster, or

¹ Russell Norman, "Episode 901," *America's Got Talent* (NBC Television, May 27, 2014).

perhaps taking a split second to praise a higher power. The judges express amazement but slight confusion at Romoff's rockstar rendition of Rimsky-Korsakov, so he offers to play another piece. This time, the wire-rimmed glasses stay on as he delicately places his small right hand on the B flat that starts Chopin's Op. 18, "Grande Valse Brillante." His eyes remain closed and his head nods left and right, evidently reveling in the piece's sublime beauty; his small body sways with carefully executed swells and dramatic moments of rubato in the melodic line.

These two contrasting performances, punctuated by shots of gasping judges and stunned audience members and framed on either side by inspirational non-diegetic music, send an emphatic message to the show's viewers: Adrian Romoff's "got talent." After the performance, the four celebrity judges offer several comments alluding to this ambiguously defined possession; notably, none contain any reference to musical details from his performance, instead linking Romoff to myriad archetypes of exceptionalism with a level of farcical hyperbole typical of the show. "We have to remind everyone at home this is a nine year-old [...] with this brain of yours, you're so sophisticated and advanced, you will become the next Steve Jobs, you will be the next Ben Franklin." "You are so far beyond your years." "He's not only talented, he's a genius." "England has Harry Potter; we have you." And, after his subsequent appearance on the show, "You know who you are? You are Boy-thoven!"²

Romoff is one of millions of amateur performers who audition each year for nationally broadcast talent competitions hoping to transcend their current circumstances by capitalizing upon their musical abilities.³ Each season, producers, judges, and millions of viewers deliberate which contestants most deserve to fulfill their American Dream and be granted the extensive resources

² Norman.

³ While the vast majority of contestants profess their desire to somehow profit from their appearances on these shows, some of them audition merely because they were encouraged to—either by their friends and families, or by recruiters from the programs who sought them out.

given to the winner of each competition. The deceptively simple answer: those who possess the most talent. Less simple, of course, are the criteria these decision-makers employ to make such a determination. Quite often, as in the above example, judges affirm a contestant's talent simply by noting that its presence is un-deniable, or difficult to refute—a form of abductive reasoning reminiscent of a different judge, Justice Potter Stewart of the Supreme Court, when he stated “I know it when I see it” in an effort to delineate the realms of the appropriate and the obscene.⁴ While the program portrays the identification of talent as a matter of common sense, this chapter aims to demonstrate that the process is far more complex and ideological.⁵

In the audition described above, for instance, Adrian Romoff performs a veritable stockpile of popular signifiers surrounding conceptions of musical talent in contemporary American culture. He is “beyond his years”: in school, in the way he speaks with the judges, and in his set of musical abilities. He exhibits personal authenticity—in the *Werktreue*-related sense Karen Leistra-Jones and others have discussed in the context of Western art music, and in the more popular-cultural sense at the heart of reality television discourse.⁶ His playing offers no indication of previous struggle; the movements of his body and the expressions on his face convey an ease that seems as though it were always present. He reports being so immersed in the seemingly painless process of practicing that he loses track of time. He is not only “gifted” in music, but also in science, commenting, “You can’t be

⁴ *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 U.S. 184 (1964), *Justia Law*.

⁵ As previous chapters have discussed, one of the central tenets of a discourse-analytical perspective, following Gramsci, is that “common sense” is simply naturalized ideology, determined by those who wield power. Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (International Publishers, 1971). Further, by “ideological,” here I mean to summon the more critical Marxian sense, as a way of reflecting a reified social reality and perpetuating false consciousness.

⁶ The dual personas Romoff embodies in this audition through his contrasting repertoire selections, down to the manipulation of his glasses and his gaze, are strongly reminiscent of not just one, but both archetypes of the Romantic virtuoso described in Karen Leistra-Jones, “Staging Authenticity: Joachim, Brahms, and the Politics of *Werktreue* Performance,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (2013): 397–436; Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (Psychology Press, 2005). As Hill describes this type of authenticity as “what appears natural, what appears true to the situation portrayed, and what appears true to the self of the people portrayed” (75).

a doctor at age five. You can be a musician, though.”⁷ Even the boy’s glasses, a marker of his overcoming of a minor physical disability, suggest a distinction between his extraordinary musical gift and his more ordinary body. Other performers declared as exceptionally talented on the program, however, exhibit entirely different sets of signifiers. How, then, do judges and viewers decide whom most deserves to win?

In this chapter, I analyze the representation and (re)production of musical talent on three popular twenty-first century television programs: *American Idol* (*AI*, 2002–2016, 2018–), *America’s Got Talent* (*AGT*, 2006–), and *The Voice* (2011–). I argue that these programs support and portray as “real” and “authentic” a particular conception of musical talent. This conception resuscitates older myths of innate, stochastically disbursed aptitudes—recalling Thomas Jefferson’s vision of talent as a more equitable means of determining who deserves success than inheritance or wealth, and as something “which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich”⁸—and rejects more systemic and nuanced understandings of ability development supported by psychological and educational research.⁹ This conception also supports the types of talent Chapter 1 described as dominant, including metaphors of giftedness, speed, and potential; association with American cultural myths around genius, prodigy, and disability; and claims about heritability or otherwise biologically innate aptitudes. Rather than being judged according to specific market standards based on a performer’s chosen genre (analogous, for instance, to the ways judges decide a dog show’s winner according to individual breed standards) talent is perfidiously represented as somehow

⁷ Norman, “Episode 901.” Of course, as many scholars have discussed, only by some rubrics can child prodigies be considered “musicians,” which is a telling indication about perceptions of musical versus, say, medical expertise.

⁸ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Although I use Jefferson’s formulation as a conspicuous early example, I do not mean to imply that he originated the particularly American iteration of this prominent viewpoint.

⁹ For one summarizing perspective from the scientific realm, see Shenk, *The Genius in All of Us*.

transcending its manifestation in a particular genre or musicking body, regardless of its age, race, gender, or other categories of identity.¹⁰

Notwithstanding minor variations stemming from each program's premise and format, these competitions collectively emphasize the Jeffersonian conception of talent described above using three related mechanisms.¹¹ First, through the dichotomous presentation of "talented" and what I have categorized as "anti-talented" contestants, the judges and producers of these shows present talent as a non-scaling, stable trait (something an aspiring musician *does* or *does not* possess from birth until death).¹² Second, through including life stories of contestants, which almost exclusively feature discussions of disability, trauma, financial hardship, or familial loss, they paradoxically portray talent as a symptom that emerges from (or perhaps even requires) experiences of adversity, rather than any particular quantity or quality of musical training. Third, through focusing ostensibly on the emotional and physiological effects of a contestant's performance over the musical or visual properties of the performance itself (whether it causes tears, goosebumps, or particular emotions), they gesture toward but rarely explain the specific signifiers of musical talent, perpetuating its definitional elusiveness; in other words, an ontological discussion of talent is circumvented by a phenomenological and affective one.¹³

¹⁰ The dog show analogy offers a thought-provoking comparison. As American Kennel Club writer Erin Shea notes, "A common point of confusion for the uninitiated is that each dog is judged on how he or she compares to the breed's standard and not how the dog compares directly to the others in the ring. For example, when a judge is looking at the Hound Group, he or she is not directly comparing the Greyhound to the Afghan Hound. The comparison is really the Greyhound to the Greyhound breed standard and the Afghan to the Afghan breed standard. A winner should exemplify his or her standard more than the other dogs represent theirs." Erin Shea, "How Judges Pick the Winners at a Dog Show; Judges Explain Their Thought Process," American Kennel Club, accessed March 13, 2018, <http://www.akc.org/content/dog-shows/articles/how-judges-pick-the-winners-at-a-dog-show/>.

¹¹ A television format is generally understood as a program's overall concept and branding—a level of specificity greater than its genre. In the context of talent shows, the format includes elements like the premise, the types of roles (host, celebrity judges, etc.), the rules and structure of the competition, episode and season length, etc.

¹² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson, "Culture, Time, and the Development of Talent," in *The Systems Model of Creativity* (Springer Netherlands, 2014), 27–46. It is important to note that *The Voice* does not include "anti-talented" acts, but in presenting an initial field of experienced performers as contestants, perpetuates this conception of talent through slightly different means.

¹³ While musical judges in other contexts (for instance, Western classical conservatory or orchestra auditions) intend to make more ontological pronouncements—"this person *is* more talented according to this standardized rubric, not according to my subjective experience"—I am not claiming that such an ontological discussion is ultimately possible.

I interpret these reality shows not only as a genre of television, but also as a discourse system, which theorist James Gee has referred to as “big D” discourse, a macro-level representation of reality that disguises socially constructed phenomena and portrays them as “common sense.”¹⁴ Rather than reflecting or mediating social identities and modes of behavior, these programs actively construct them in ways that influence viewers’ ideologies and identities beyond the bounds of the talent competition itself.¹⁵ As Frederic Jameson has noted, popular narratives—to which these programs significantly contribute—are socially symbolic texts, and a primary mechanism through which class relations are understood and negotiated.¹⁶ Further, the particularly interactive nature of these competitions, with open audition calls and widespread audience voting systems, guarantees viewer engagement (and, most importantly for the program, network profits), strengthening their impact as popular narrative.¹⁷ And despite reality television’s eponymous claim of capturing real-life characters, moments, and social interactions, every detail presented—from complex recruitment procedures to reactions from judges and audience members—is carefully staged.¹⁸ Under opaque claims of reality, these shows ritualize representations of talent that, through a ludic lens, “obscure their links to the labour conditions normalized under neoliberalism,” as Nick Couldry has argued.¹⁹

Indeed, as I noted in the introduction, summoning Stuart Hall’s figuration, talent is “more like a language than it is like the way in which we are biologically constituted.”

¹⁴ N. Lorenzo-Dus and P. Blitvich, *Real Talk: Reality Television and Discourse Analysis in Action* (Springer, 2013). Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*.

¹⁵ Lorenzo-Dus and Blitvich, *Real Talk*.

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982); discussed in *American Idol* in Matthew Wheelock Stahl, “A Moment Like This: American Idol and Narratives of Meritocracy,” in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate* (Psychology Press, 2004), 212–32.

¹⁷ As Henry Jenkins notes, “at every step along the way, the viewers are invited to imagine that ‘it could be me or someone I know.’ From there, the weekly votes increase the viewer’s engagement, building a strong allegiance to the individual performers. By the time the records are released, many of the core consumers have already endorsed the performers, and fan clubs are already involved with grassroots marketing.” In Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (NYU Press, 2004), 350.

¹⁸ Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, *Understanding Reality Television* (Psychology Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Indeed, As Türken et al. have observed, “the neoliberal subject is increasingly construed as a free, autonomous, individualized, self-regulating actor understood as a source of capital; as human capital.” Türken et al., “Making Sense of Neoliberal Subjectivity.” Nick Couldry, “Reality TV, or The Secret Theater of Neoliberalism,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 11, 2008): 3–13.

Why music? What is it about *musical* ability that has found such seeming success and influence in this popular entertainment genre? While Chapter 1 has raised this question broadly, examining the circumstances that rendered musical ability especially conducive to mechanisms of Bourdieuan misrecognition and ideologies of talent, the current chapter offers a new perspective through considering the record-setting success of musical talent shows. This context offers a symbiotic ideological arrangement: musical performance serves the needs of reality television, as both the audiovisual medium and music's particular accessibility to non-experts supports viewer engagement and participation. At the same time, the various tropes and techniques employed in reality television—for instance, narratives that focus equally on participants' life stories and personalities as their abilities during the competition—further strengthen ideologies of musical talent's innateness and immutability.

One preliminary answer to the question of music's effectiveness hinges on the disparity between degrees and varieties of musical training among the parties involved—the judges, audiences, but also the contestants themselves—leading to exchanges (and understandings) that focus more on the affective responses the music elicits in viewers than musical technique. As the following section details, this significant variance between participants' formal training and cultural mores is both influential and representative of broader American educational dynamics. In cooking shows, to offer a counterexample, viewers are not as well positioned to make pronouncements and to vote—because they cannot taste the food the competitors produce, but also because culinary judges are generally granted more authority, their specialized training positioning them as experts, as compared to the more spectator- and sportscaster-like judges on music shows. Discourses of ability on cooking programs explicitly address details around particular skills and the means of their development (“I

practiced this recipe ten times this week to perfect this particular step of the process”), and seldom involve appeals to concepts like innate gifts, inspiration, possession, or genius.²⁰

Talent Shows and/as Educational Discourse Systems

Discourses of musical talent addressed here both represent and directly influence educational and political debates about the assessment of ability beyond the realm of reality television. Judge commentary and myriad other elements of each program constantly allude to the season-long, professedly meritocratic competition as something akin to processes in the educational system.²¹ On *The Voice*, for example, judge Adam Levine told one contestant that the show was especially about the cultivation of talent, asserting that he would help her realize the musical potential she demonstrated: “You’re seventeen, and there’s stuff you need to learn, and I can teach you those things,” telling her that she would learn how to build “confidence, happiness, and success on this show.”²² Indeed, each program intentionally introduces ideological slippage between contestants’ success “on this show” and success more holistically—between “reality television” and reality.

Throughout these programs’ portrayals of reality, the idea of meritocracy—which we might define as “the idea that whatever your social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for ‘talent’ to combine with ‘effort’ in order to ‘rise to the top,’” following cultural studies scholar Jo Littler—serves as a seemingly unproblematic axiom on which each competition rests (with the sorting mechanisms of each competition standing in synecdochally for

²⁰ I do not intend to suggest that there are no appeals to innate difference in cooking shows or other non-music reality competition programs, but rather that such perceived innateness does not play as central and sensationalized a role. Further, non-music programs posit a different sort of judge authority, which rests more on specialized training and the type of expertise that results. While *American Idol* and *The Voice* ostensibly selected judges as “experts” in the sense that they have been successful within the music industry, the conflation of success and competence as an evaluator and coach is a common debate within American musical discourses. Moreover, *America’s Got Talent* seems to have chosen judges more on the basis of celebrity alone, as figures like Heidi Klum and Howie Mandel indicate.

²¹ This raises the issue of educational discourses about equality of opportunity and equality of achievement, which I address more specifically in the following chapter.

²² Alan Carter, “Season 11, Episode, 2.” *The Voice* (NBC Television, September 20, 2016). Levine is addressing contestant We McDonald.

“society”).²³ Though we explored the relationship between the constructions of talent and meritocracy more extensively in Chapter 1, it is important to note that the Jeffersonian understanding of talent dominating these talent shows presumes a meritocratic agenda; as Jefferson declared in 1813, “there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents.”²⁴

Despite Jefferson’s positing of naturalness, it is important to note that meritocracy is just as complex and as ideologically charged as the concept of talent. The word itself originated from a satirical essay by British sociologist Michael Young, who hoped to emphasize the hypocrisy and absurdity of a concept that created a new exclusionary elite according to the conceptions of talent and ability.²⁵ As Hannah Arendt has noted about this line of logic, “Meritocracy contradicts the principle of equality, of an equalitarian democracy, no less than any other oligarchy.”²⁶ In *American Idol*, *America’s Got Talent*, and *The Voice*, then, the possession of talent is the foundation upon which some type of idealized musical oligarchy rests—one that aligns well with American educational system’s neoliberal imbrication of talent with economic and personal value. Such an imbrication, psychologists Curran and Hill have found, “falsely and insidiously connects the principles of educational and professional achievement, status, and wealth with innate personal value.”²⁷ Media studies scholar John Fisk has suggested that the competitive structure of such shows “reproduces the education system in Western societies: in this, all students (supposedly) start equal: those with natural ability pass successively more discriminating tests (examinations) and emerge as the highly qualified few who are fitted (by nature, so the story goes) for the high-income jobs, and positions

²³ Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, 1.

²⁴ Letter to John Adams, October 28, 1813. Robert M. S. McDonald, “The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Retirement Series,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (June 1, 2013): 190–91.

²⁵ Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. For a helpful contextualization of Young’s position, see Lampert, *Meritocratic Education and Social Worthlessness*, 52.

²⁶ Hannah Arendt and Jerome Kohn, *Between Past and Future* (Penguin, 2006).

²⁷ Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, “Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences From 1989 to 2016,” *Psychological Bulletin*, December 28, 2017.

with high degrees of social power and influence.”²⁸ Rather than simply reflecting and reproducing educational paradigms, these programs’ conceptions of talent also actively feed back into the structural and ideological tapestry of the American educational system.²⁹ Educational debates—around ideal gatekeeping practices, assessments of individual difference, and approaches to teaching different ability levels, to name a few consequential topics—are not separately contained within educational and popular-cultural discourses, but rather influence and are influenced by one another.³⁰ For instance, Littler has shown how popular television’s active promotion of the notion of a meritocratic society has directly influenced political and educational discourses.³¹ These televised talent competitions are not merely supporting an overly idealistic and inspiring myth of randomly bestowed innate gifts; rather, they are perpetuating racist and classist discourses that occlude systemic inequalities through an exclusive emphasis on individual ability, and powerfully inform educational politics.

In her blog post, “If Only Our Education System Was Run Like *American Idol*,” educational psychologist Lisa Natcharian posed this usually more metaphorical relationship as an analogy, advocating for a more rigorous tracking system based on aptitude tests like those discussed in the first chapter. Natcharian suggests:

What would happen if our educational system were based on the principals [sic] of *American Idol*? Well, the first thing that would occur would be a screening process where every child was evaluated to identify his or her gifts and talents. [...] Those students who showed that they had academic gifts [...] would be routed into a

²⁸ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (Methuen, 1987).

²⁹ Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, *The Meritocracy Myth* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). In terms of myths that strongly circulate in educational discourses, see in particular Chapter Five, “Making the Grade: Education and Mobility.” For a perspective that more specifically addresses the racialized nature of this notion of “discovering” individuals with natural ability through the educational system, see Lauren Stark, “Naming Giftedness: Whiteness and Ability Discourse in US Schools,” *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 24, no. 4 (December 2014): 394.

³⁰ As James Gee summarizes, “Each of us is a member of many Discourses and each Discourse represents one of our ever multiple identities. These Discourses need not, and often do not, represent consistent and compatible values. There are conflicts among them and each of us lives and breathes these conflicts as we act out our various Discourses. For some, these conflicts are more dramatic than for others. The conflicts between the home-based Discourse of some minority children in the United States and the Discourses of the school are deep and apparent.” Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies*, 4.

³¹ Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (Routledge, 2017).

program where experts in their field would train the students to make the most of their gifts.”³²

In addition to summoning a meaning of talent that resolves the oligarchical paradox of meritocratic systems by arguing that “we each have our own special talent” (a meaning analyzed further in Chapter 1’s discussion of talent as passion), Natcharian is arguing here that such talents are able to be identified in some more objective way than they currently are—and that *American Idol* has achieved this ideal.

Similarly, in a book entitled *Educating Today’s Overindulged Youth: Combat Narcissism by Building Foundations, Not Pedestals*, education scholars Chad Mason and Karen Brackman suggest that interactions between contestants and judges in talent competition programs like *American Idol* serve as a metaphor as well as a symptom of phenomena within the educational system:

In what we term the *American Idol* reality-check, it is possible to begin to delineate the parallel between Simon Cowell as a talent judge and the American teacher. In some ways, the criticism/feedback aspect of the show is symbolic of how educating today’s youth and the repercussions from their parents is, at times, tumultuous. In a narcissistic culture, the judge’s credibility is immediately called into question—even if he or she has the experience and expertise necessary to fill the position. Likewise, today’s teacher must understand that more and more students and their parents challenge evaluative statements, and the teacher’s expertise may immediately be questioned.³³

As these two examples demonstrate, talent shows like *American Idol* readily, if also quite strategically, offer numerous symbolic commentaries—either critiques or suggestions—about the educational process. Such symbolism is made all the more powerful and appealing by the hyper-produced

³² The author of this piece is indeed an advocate of gifted education, seeking to demonstrate the benefits of talent-based tracking systems. Her biography states that she “holds a master’s degree in Educational Psychology with a concentration in gifted education [...] She is a consultant in gifted education, a freelance writer on educational topics [...], a member of the Massachusetts Gifted and Talented Advisory Committee, and the mother of three gifted children.” Lisa Natcharian, “If Only Our Education System Was Run like American Idol,” *masslive.com*, accessed November 20, 2017, http://blog.masslive.com/real_learning/2010/04/if_only_our_education_system_was_run_like_american_idol.html.

³³ Chad Mason and Karen Brackman, *Educating Today’s Overindulged Youth: Combat Narcissism by Building Foundations, Not Pedestals* (R&L Education, 2009).

narrative format of the shows, in which “talented” contestants are rewarded, regardless of their (unfailing colorful and captivating) life stories, disabilities, or racial or socioeconomic backgrounds.

In the remainder of this chapter, I first demonstrate how American conceptions of talent shaped, and were shaped by, the long tradition of American talent competitions, from vaudeville shows to *The Voice*. Second, I examine three principal mechanisms by which the contemporary talent shows in question promote the particular Jeffersonian conception of talent: namely, through portrayals of anti-talent, adversity, and affect.

A History of American Talent Shows

Radio amateurs compose the world’s biggest fraternity, both actively and potentially. Every choir singer thinks she is a possible Ethel Waters—if she could only get a chance to prove it.³⁴

Ralph Matthews, *Afro-American*, 1937

The programs examined in this chapter are part of a much longer tradition of American entertainment formats that have actively constructed and capitalized upon the Jeffersonian myth of talent described above. Although the genealogies of *American Idol*, *America’s Got Talent*, and *The Voice* trace most directly back to the vaudevillian tradition of amateur nights that migrated from England to the States in the mid-nineteenth century, contemporary televised talent programs draw upon talent-related tropes from a number of other formative nineteenth-century entertainment genres, including burlesque, minstrel shows, freak shows, circuses, and community theaters—all of which, we recall, shaped perceptions of musical talent that influenced receptions of Thomas Wiggins during the same years. This section briefly examines this genealogy of talent competitions in order to situate them as an American historical tradition and as a discourse system. As is the case with the

³⁴ Ralph Matthews, “Everybody’s Riding on the Wheel of Chance: Amateur Radio Hours Have an Allure for All Types and Ages--Major Bowers Takes Em All,” *Afro-American*, April 3, 1937.

contemporary iterations of these shows, I argue that wider conceptions of musical talent shaped and were shaped by this entertainment genre.

The very premise of amateur talent competitions emerges from ideas about the nature of musical ability: rather than pursuing specialized educational and professional routes to achieve success and stardom, they claimed, aspiring musicians with “potential” had enough of the necessary qualities to be successfully “discovered.” This assertion acted as a critique of the boundaries between musical amateurism and professionalism, which had become a significant point of tension by the height of vaudeville’s popularity. The etymological origins of the amateur—‘amare,’ to love—convey the concept’s originally positive valence signifying someone motivated not by a desire for profit, but by passion.³⁵ For centuries prior to the Industrial Revolution, the mantle of amateurism was generally claimed by European noblemen, whose pursuit of activities like music making reinforced their class status and surplus temporal and financial resources.³⁶ This understanding of the amateur is exemplified by Arthur Schopenhauer’s take on what makes artists great, defending amateurism as existing nobly outside the grip of capitol: “the greatest work has always come from such men [who pursue art for love], not from paid servants.”³⁷ As we recall, however, Schopenhauer’s understanding of exceptional musical ability did not privilege class or educational cultivation over that more elusive grain of originality, which he argued, was bestowed by nature. As he noted (though from a sociohistorical vantage point, discussed more fully in the previous chapter, that presumed only white men of certain social strata could be so gifted) those special artists cannot be chosen and trained, but rather “emerge from the multitude.”³⁸

³⁵ Knott, *Amateur Craft*, xiii-xiv.

³⁶ Knott, *Amateur Craft*, xiii-xiv.

³⁷ Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 481.

³⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Literature* (Books on Demand, 2010).

On Stage

By later in the nineteenth century, however, increased availability of musical instruments, leisure time, and educational resources across a wider range of socioeconomic groups precipitated shifts in understandings of the amateur musician. As the author of an *Atlantic Monthly* article declared in 1891, the amateur had “become almost a term of opprobrium. The work of an amateur, the touch of the amateur, a mere amateur, amateurish—these are different current expressions which all mean the same thing, bad work.”³⁹ Stephen Knott has pointed out that the threat of amateurs eventually eclipsing professionals’ levels of musical (and other) skills “sowed the seeds for the dichotomization of amateur practice from professional practice as artisans, craftsmen, and artists used the word amateur pejoratively to denote lack of commitment, poor skill and ineptitude rather than doing something for its own sake.”⁴⁰ Well before vaudevillian amateur nights had transitioned to the radio medium, then, the idea of amateur talent had become synonymous with lowbrow forms of entertainment and, to some, popular culture’s cultural bankruptcy more broadly. The tension between understandings of amateurism as lowbrow ineptitude and amateurism as a pure, authentic mode of artistic engagement has endured in contemporary contexts. Talent shows, however, have continued to affirm the latter category, appealing to rags-to-riches narratives that champion the power of amateur passion, the possibility of social mobility, and the connection between one’s perceived natural gifts and the pursuit of the American Dream.

From the perspective of vaudeville theater managers and producers, events featuring aspiring amateurs promised an inexhaustible supply of free or nearly free labor to occupy the stage, as well as a guaranteed ticket-paying audience present to support (or, just as often, to jeer at) performers from their communities. Amateur nights therefore relied upon—and actively cultivated—aspiring

³⁹ As quoted in Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 140.

⁴⁰ Knott, *Amateur Craft*.

performers' assumptions that they may in fact possess the "undiscovered talent" to win. As Junhow Wei, David Grazian, and others have observed, the entertainment industry's assurance that anyone may possess the required talent to gain fame and fortune has operated much like a confidence (or con) game.⁴¹ By perpetuating the belief—through advertising, active recruitment, and selectively touting the stories of contestants who successfully transitioned from obscurity to celebrity—that all aspiring performers may be talented, promoters persuaded potential participants to invest themselves in such competitions. Even after being humiliated and rejected, contestants often retain their faith in their own undiscovered potential, hope for a big break in the future, and confidence in the idea of such a meritocratic system through a process of "cooling out," as Erving Goffman and others have discussed.⁴²

One of the most prominent and influential nineteenth-century amateur nights to employ these tactics occurred every other Friday in Henry C. Miner's Bowery Theater in Manhattan, New York.⁴³ The venue was connected to a saloon, and the audiences often became rowdy when presented with particularly stubborn and unimpressive acts. As most histories of the Bowery Theater attest, its amateur night was the first to employ the famous "hook" to quell the restive audience's boos. As Miner's son Tom recalls, one particularly painful and persistent tenor solo provoked someone backstage to grab an abandoned cane and pull the offending performer offstage by the neck, much to the audience's enjoyment.⁴⁴ The hook became a central draw of the shows and spread

⁴¹ Junhow Wei, "I'm the Next American Idol: Cooling Out, Accounts, and Perseverance at Reality Talent Show Auditions," *Symbolic Interaction* 39, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 3–25; David Grazian, "The Production of Popular Music as a Confidence Game: The Case of the Chicago Blues," *Qualitative Sociology* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 137–58; Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Penguin Books, 1959); Erving Goffman, "On Cooling the Mark Out," *Psychiatry* 15, no. 4 (November 1, 1952): 451–63.

⁴² Goffman, "On Cooling the Mark Out." In criminal jargon, the "mark" is a victim or prospective victim of some type of criminal exploitation, which Goffman describes as "the sucker—the person who is taken in." In confidence games, or "cons," marks who have been exploited go through a "cooling out" phase, forced to cope with their loss of their perceived role (in the case of talent show rejects, as talented) and make sense of their failures.

⁴³ Frank Cullen, *Vaudeville Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performances in America* (Psychology Press, n.d.), 524.

⁴⁴ Cullen, 524.

to amateur nights around the country, with audiences eagerly shouting, “give ‘em the hook!” in response to obviously unworthy contestants. As one article from 1906 recalled (in conjunction with the illustration shown in Figure 3.2), “These cries are the signal for the backdrop to be lifted, while a stage hand reaches forth a long pole, terminating in a sickle-like prehensile contrivance that grasps the performer and hustles him away back, while the drop descends and hides him from view.”⁴⁵ The concept of “getting the hook” has endured in popular discourse, and as a schadenfreude-satisfying tactic, it set a meaningful precedent around dismissing and shaming unskilled contestants—a strategy that emphasized, celebrated, and helped construct a non-scaling distinction between the talented and the untalented.



Figure 3.2: Star Theater amateur night advertisement, from *Milwaukee Free Press*, March 25, 1906.

On Air

The popular theatrical amateur night format translated smoothly to radio.⁴⁶ As early as the 1920s, radio programs presented “opportunity nights,” inviting aspiring stars to vie for first prize—an especially appealing prospect because of the expanded scope of radio audiences. This expansive

⁴⁵ “Get the Hook! A Night With Amateur Thespians at the Burlesque Theater,” *Milwaukee Free Press*, March 25, 1906.

⁴⁶ John Shepherd, *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World: Volume II: Performance and Production* (A&C Black, 2003). As Shepard notes, “Because radio signals traveled long distances, these performers all hoped that the right people would hear them. Thus, it would be accurate to describe radio programming in its early days in most countries as an ongoing talent show.”

audience was also given the novel opportunity to “elect” winners by sending in postcards.⁴⁷ By the 1930s, with many Americans out of work, radio talent shows became a national craze, with aspiring stars hoping to escape poverty through showcasing their undiscovered talent. *Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour*, which debuted in 1934, capitalized upon these difficult circumstances; as Bowes himself remarked, “A big percentage of our applicants are on the relief rolls already. If we can get only a few of them off, we have accomplished a little something.”⁴⁸ The show quickly became the most popular program on the radio, with thousands of hopeful contestants flocking to New York to audition, despite odds of 70,000 to 1 to appear on the show, by one estimate.⁴⁹ As John Dunning noted about the population of aspiring stars who waited to audition, “It was a tide to rival the great migration of workers from Oklahoma to California in the Dust Bowl years.”⁵⁰

Americans of the 1930s were also experiencing the first widespread application of ability grouping in public school systems, with the concept of “gifted” children with a measurable quantity of potential gaining increasing traction. Not unlike school systems’ evaluation-based tracking systems, *Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour* offered first-round winners second appearances, three-time winners a chance at a championship round, and champion of the overall talent competition an enticing two-thousand dollar scholarship.⁵¹ Bowes’ successful “discovery” of artists such as Frank Sinatra, and later, Pat Boone and Gladys Knight, served as prominent evidence of the possibility of a life-changing triumph, however slight and determined by chance. Indeed, Bowes spun the program’s “wheel of fortune” to determine which contestant would be summoned to stage to the well-known

⁴⁷ Christopher H. Sterling, *Encyclopedia of Radio* (Routledge, 2004), 2268.

⁴⁸ *The New Yorker*, vol. 11 (F-R Publishing Corporation, 1935).

⁴⁹ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 426.

⁵⁰ Dunning, 426.

⁵¹ Richard Pfefferman, *Strategic Reinvention in Popular Culture: The Encore Impulse* (Springer, 2013), 130. Indeed, \$2000 in 1935 would today be worth over \$36,000. “US Inflation Calculator,” US Inflation Calculator, accessed June 27, 2018, <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>.

song, “round and round she goes, and where she stops nobody knows.”⁵² The show’s programming and on-air conversation were not matters of chance, however; Bowes reputedly handed potential contestants scripts from which they were required to read, and drew up extensive contracts limiting their ability to perform elsewhere or cite their appearance on the show whatsoever.⁵³ And unlike professionals, amateurs were usually ill equipped to combat such tactics, willing to adhere to any set of stipulations that would provide them with the coveted chance to showcase their abilities.

Amateur Hour shaped popular conceptions of musical talent and significantly influenced the formats and tactics of subsequent talent competition shows. Elaborating on the well-known vaudevillian hook, acts by disillusioned contestants received a gong that ceremonially proclaimed a contestant’s lack of talent—a process that audiences enthusiastically beckoned when they deemed it necessary.⁵⁴ As one newspaper article remarked, drawing connections between talent competitions and democratic ideals that foreshadowed similar debates in the twenty-first century, “If the public could be depended upon to rise up as spontaneously against some national evil as it does against a sour note, there would be few political scandals left uncorrected. But people take their amateurs more seriously.”⁵⁵ *Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour* transitioned to television in 1948 with Bowes’ successor Ted Mack, provocatively extending the mail- and call-in voting system to a recently invented

⁵² Historically speaking, these artists were widely disbursed, with Sinatra appearing with the “Hoboken four” in 1935 and Gladys Knight appearing at age 7 in 1952.

⁵³ Dunning, *On the Air*, 427. As Dunning explains, discussing a *Radio Guide* reporter who posed as a spy and got past the first rounds, “Edwards was given a script and told by a secretary: ‘These are the questions the major will ask and the answers you are to give.’ He would have to know his lines perfectly, she said, or he couldn’t be on the program.”

⁵⁴ It is important to acknowledge the Amateur Night at the Apollo, which has been held continuously since 1934, focusing specifically, and influentially, on the African American community. Using another Gong-esque tactic the show called the ‘executioner,’ originally played by successful contestant Sandman Sims, who was also a tap dancer and chased rejected contestants off-stage. Ella Fitzgerald was one of the first winners of “Amateur Night” in 1934. Other winners include Billie Holiday, Gladys Knight, Wilson Pickett, Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, and the Jackson 5. Four first-place wins earned performers a one-week professional engagement at the theatre. See “Amateur Night At The Apollo,” *Apollo Theater* (blog), accessed April 4, 2018, <https://www.apollotheater.org/amateur-night/>. And Douglas Martin, “Sandman Sims, 86, Tap Dancer and Fixture at the Apollo,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2003, sec. Arts.

⁵⁵ Matthews, “Everybody’s Riding on the Wheel of Chance.” Similarly, news coverage after the fourth season of *American Idol* remarked, “The once sneered-at amateur singing competition has galvanised the US population more than any other and rivals the fervour that accompanies presidential elections.” See, Catherine Elsworth, “US Pop Show Victor Attracts More Votes than Any President,” *The Telegraph*, May 26, 2006, sec. World News.

mechanism dubbed the “clap-o-meter” which allowed for live audience feedback—a powerful tactic that served as a stepping-stone to *American Idol*’s influential text-in voting system.⁵⁶

On Screen

Airing from 1946 to 1958 on CBS, *Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts* received unprecedented numbers of viewers, dominating other television programs in the first years of the Nielsen ratings.⁵⁷ Not unlike *The Voice*’s dual focus on contestants and coaches, Godfrey’s program highlighted the role of the “talent scouts” as much as the “talent” that they had discovered, a focus that complemented the rising prominence of talent scouts in the music and film industry during the 1950s.⁵⁸ This scout-centered premise further aggrandized the process of discovery over specific educational and skill-building practices. Like the *Amateur Hour*, *Godfrey’s Talent Scouts* also employed an applause meter to determine winners of each show, which (like every other audience voting system we will discuss) was often manipulated to favor certain contestants—a narrative tactic that prioritized entertainment value over realistic depictions of skill development and skilled artists, prefiguring increasingly distorted versions of “reality” portrayed by contemporary reality television programs.⁵⁹ In another technologically trailblazing, reality-distorting move, *Godfrey’s Talent Scouts* was also the first television show to show previously videotaped material, rather than broadcasting live—evidence that talent shows well before *American Idol* served as sites of innovation in the entertainment industry. The popular program did feature a staggering number of eventually successful artists that encouraged continued audience participation and profits, including Eddie Fisher, Tony Bennett, Rosemary Clooney, Patsy Cline, Pat Boone, Elvis Presley, and Buddy Holly.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Chalaby, *The Format Age*, 56.

⁵⁷ Horace Newcomb and Lambdin Kay Distinguished Professor for the Peabody Awards Horace Newcomb, *Encyclopedia of Television* (Routledge, 2014).

⁵⁸ David Lubar, *Hidden Talents* (Macmillan, 2015).

⁵⁹ Chalaby, *The Format Age*.

⁶⁰ Newcomb and Newcomb, *Encyclopedia of Television*.

By the 1970s, talent competitions had dominated radio and television for so many generations that a satirical take on the format, called *The Gong Show*, found widespread popularity. Created in 1976 by Chuck Barris, the program presented ridiculous acts—incompetent singers, teenagers balancing ladders on their chins, women throwing batons while riding a unicycle, punctuated by a few more traditionally skillful acts—and sarcastically critiqued the boundaries between talent and non-talent, avant-garde and joke act, and, indeed, winner and loser.⁶¹ Despite its satirical intentions, however, the show nevertheless provided a venue for viewers to engage in the type of schadenfreude that *America's Got Talent* and *American Idol* would profit upon decades later: laughter *at* rather than laughter *with*, a phenomenon similar to what Theodore Adorno had described as “the worst bourgeois sadism” in a filmic context.⁶² Taking this understanding of viewer malice even further, television scholar Doyle Greene has remarked, “At its most sinister, *The Gong Show* became the televised equivalent of the horrifying selection and extermination processes of the concentration camp.”⁶³ Although this is a particularly severe comparison to draw, Greene’s comment is a reminder of talent’s conceptual connections not just to the ideology of meritocracy, discussed earlier, but to the eugenics movement, from Francis Galton to Carl Seashore.⁶⁴

Perhaps the most successful talent show in American history—that is, if one were to judge by the number of subsequently successful artists to lose after their first televised audition—is CBS’s

⁶¹ Doyle Greene, *Politics and the American Television Comedy: A Critical Survey from I Love Lucy through South Park* (McFarland, 2007), 148.

⁶² Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (University of California Press, 1984), 156.

⁶³ Greene, *Politics and the American Television Comedy*, 149.

⁶⁴ Eugenics’ goal of selective reproduction was based upon the assumption that certain talents were inherited, and familial lines without such talents should be eliminated. As Seashore suggested in the context of music, for instance, “If certain musical talents are heritable, as we believe them to be, it is quite within the power of future generations to enhance the quality and degree of musical talent by conscious selection.” Charles Benedict Davenport, “Scientific Papers of the Second International Congress of Eugenics Held at American Museum of Natural History, New York,” in *Wellcome Library*, 1921. For a discussion of this eugenic history in an educational research context, see Adria R. Hoffman, “‘Blessed’: Musical Talent, Smartness, & Figured Identities,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 48, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 606–20.

Star Search, which originally ran from 1983 to 1995, hosted by Ed McMahon.⁶⁵ The hoards of hopefuls who auditioned for the show included (to name a few) Justin Timberlake, Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears, Dave Chapelle, Alanis Morissette, Destiny's Child (as Girls Tyme), Usher, the Backstreet Boys. Rather than pitting contestants from a variety of categories against one another for a single grand prize as many variety shows had done in the past, *Star Search* held separate competitions for different genres of acts, including female vocalist, male vocalist, junior vocalist, junior dance, vocal group, spokesmodel, comedy, and dance. In another gesture toward impartiality, a panel of anonymous "expert judges" gave the contestants a score, rather than a set of entertaining celebrities or the ostensibly less-expert audience (although ties were broken with an audience vote). While *Star Search* was generally popular, its winners' relative lack of commercial success is evidence that success on talent competitions does not necessarily beget musical stardom. Rather, the program formats, and their manufacturing of an ethos of talent around the performers, constructs and subsequently cashes in on the talent of the artists they feature.⁶⁶

On Reality TV

Despite exponentially larger production budgets and accompanying developments in style and format, the most recent generation of televised talent shows from the turn of the twenty-first century have retained the thematic foundations of their predecessors. The format first found major success as *Popstars* in New Zealand in 1999 and *Pop Idol* in the United Kingdom in 2001, transitioning to the States as *American Idol* in 2002. Suffice to say, however, that a collection of producers and executives from the music and entertainment industry combined many of the features of the talent shows discussed here with new element of "reality" that focused more intently on the characters and lives of the contestants. Simon Fuller, one of the franchise's creators, described this

⁶⁵ In the wake of *American Idol*'s success, a new version of *Star Search* ran from 2003-2004.

⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Penguin Books Limited, 2008).

initial concept as “a reality music competition and soap opera brought together in one massive show.”⁶⁷

The *Idol* format rapidly and rampantly gained popularity—a sign not only of particularly successful marketing and management strategies, but also of the continued appeal of the talent search premise for twenty-first century American viewers.⁶⁸ Just two years after *American Idol*'s premiere, over thirty iterations of *Idol* surfaced worldwide, from national versions like those in Portugal or South Africa to transnational ones like *Asian Idol* or *SuperStar*—which includes contestants from a number of Arabic-speaking nations. Also by 2004, *American Idol* had gained unprecedented popularity, climbing to the top of the Nielsen ratings for eight consecutive years (still an unbroken record for any television show) with contestants reaching number one on the *Billboard* charts 345 times with their own songs in the first ten seasons.⁶⁹ *Idol* fundamentally affected the ways that the popular music industry recruited and developed popular artists. As Simon Fuller recalled, “It was a new paradigm—a new way to take an artist and music to the consumer, and have them buy the songs and go and see the concerts. I didn’t need the music industry.”⁷⁰ In addition to solidifying a number of generic conventions for subsequent programs—like SMS text-based live voting systems, more extensive discussions of contestants’ life stories, a culturally diverse assortment pop star archetypes—*American Idol* also firmly (re)established the particular discourses of talent laid out at the start of this chapter.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Chalaby, *The Format Age*, 57.

⁶⁸ Joost de Bruin, *Adapting Idols: Authenticity, Identity and Performance in a Global Television Format* (Routledge, 2016), 1.

⁶⁹ “Ten Years of ‘American Idol’ Chart Dominance: Clarkson, Underwood, Daughtry, Fantasia, More | Billboard,” accessed April 12, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1093819/ten-years-of-american-idol-chart-dominance-clarkson-underwood-daughtry>.

⁷⁰ “‘American Idol’ Creator Simon Fuller Says the Show ‘Will Be Coming Back For Sure,’” *Billboard*, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/idol-worship/7318954/american-idol-simon-fuller-interview>.

⁷¹ *American Idol* also sparked a new pop music industry paradigm by finding ways to sell pop star personalities over the musical products in a post-CD era where album sales in any format continue to wane as streaming culture continues to rise; it incorporated more biographical depth into its character development than previous reality programs; it was also ideologically innovative in its assertion that pop stars, to flip the dominant script about early twenty-first century celebrities, could indeed be born, not simply created by teams of producers in the music industry.

The “reality television” interventions made by the producers of the *Idol* franchise have been critical to its success. The supposition of realistic portrayal is perhaps the most significant “conjuring trick” of contemporary talent shows, to summon Roland Barthes’ description of myths.⁷² While claiming merely to contribute publicity, resources, and a dose of television sparkle to a process meant to parallel meritocratic systems in schools, workplaces, the music industry, and elsewhere, every second of each episode is strategically planned, or even scripted, and manipulated by complex editing procedures. In the three programs examined here, participant agreements and releases provide producers the rights to portray any film footage they obtain in any way, requiring contestants to agree to statements like this before participating: “the judges, host, and special correspondents of the Program may reveal or relate information about me of a personal, private, intimate, surprising, defamatory, disparaging, embarrassing or unfavorable nature, that may be fictional or factual.”⁷³ Although these contracts mandate a hefty dose of confidentiality, numerous participants have attested to the filmic degree of premeditation on these “reality” programs. One past contestant, whose acrobatics group was approached to audition for one program many years in a row, recalled the process of preparing for their first audition in an anonymous blog post: “We have storyboarded every four seconds and provided a recommended shot list to the director. [...] We have run the full act once and the fire section three times, for the stage manager, the director, and the fire marshal.”⁷⁴ In the pre-audition interview, she noted that their responses were guided or fully solicited, with comments like, “Could you phrase it something like, “This is our big chance?” and

⁷² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Macmillan, 1972). Barthes continues, “it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance.”

⁷³ Most recently, musicologist William Cheng called these contracts “draconian, daresay Faustian” in his discussion of portrayals of disability on these programs. William Cheng, “Staging Overcoming: Narratives of Disability and Meritocracy in Reality Singing Competitions,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 11, no. 2 (May 2017): 184–214. The quotation is taken from *America’s Got Talent* “Participant Agreement and Release,” 2017, <http://www.americasgottalentauditions.com/paperwork/>

⁷⁴ “Reality,” accessed November 16, 2017, <https://whipchick.livejournal.com/12805.html>.

“Just say, ‘We’re here to win’, and make it really big, okay?”⁷⁵ Other accounts have detailed the ways live audiences were coached, contestants’ song choices were not choices, the decisions of judges were predetermined, and, as the excerpt from the *America’s Got Talent* agreement above insinuates, purely fictional elements were woven into program narratives.⁷⁶ I mention these reality television elements here to accentuate the degree of manipulation involved in these programs’ constructions of talent—especially considering that performers’ talent is often tenderly cited by fans and members of the show as a lone beacon of authenticity, a palpable grain of vocalized humanity in the midst of the obviously contrived, consumerist, and hyper-produced artifice of each program.⁷⁷

First presented in 2006 on NBC, *America’s Got Talent* also frequently features auditions by aspiring superstar vocalists, but is different from *American Idol* and *The Voice* due to its inclusion of a variety of non-musical acts. Following more closely in the footsteps of nineteenth-century vaudeville and variety show amateur nights discussed earlier, the globally reaching *Got Talent* franchise invites a broader range of entertainers to audition—including dancers, ventriloquists, comedians, magicians, musicians of any sort, acrobats, animal acts, and more. As the website stipulates, the producers will consider “*any* age and *any* talent – nothing is off-limits.”⁷⁸ Despite the fact that “*any* talent” is invited to audition, however, not all manifestations are equally valued or rewarded by the judges and voting audiences. Similarly to *American Idol*, *AGT* constructs a distinctive binary in its representation of contestants—as Greene describes it, “between ‘kooks and loons’ and ‘authentic talent.’”⁷⁹ As a part

⁷⁵ “Reality.”

⁷⁶ For another example of this, see Joanna Rothkopf, “I Auditioned for America’s Got Talent to Find Out If I’ve Got Talent,” Jezebel, accessed March 8, 2018, <https://jezebel.com/i-auditioned-for-americas-got-talent-to-find-out-if-ive-1792364306>.

⁷⁷ I reference the grain of the voice here to highlight the ways these shows often reference inexplicable aspects contestants’ voices in their reactions. Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980* (Northwestern University Press, 2009). For one example of scholarship on perceived and constructed “reality” of reality television, see Graeme Turner, *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn* (SAGE Publications, 2010).

⁷⁸ “About Auditioning for America’s Got Talent,” *Official America’s Got Talent Audition Site 2017-2018* (blog), October 10, 2013, <http://www.americasgottalentauditions.com/about/>.

⁷⁹ Greene, *Politics and the American Television Comedy*, 151.

of the program's implicit statement about the exceptionality of musical ability (reflected, too, in the number of musical winners in the show's history) musicians on *AGT* are more often accorded magical television moments and portrayed as "authentic talent."

Because of its *variety show* format, *AGT* forwards a particularly polymorphic understanding of talent, to extend Henry Kingsbury's observation about the multiple and often incongruous manifestations of what conservatory musicians saw as "talent."⁸⁰ Indeed, the program's eponymous assertion invites the question of whether "America" has "talent" or "talents"—in other words, whether successful contestants share a sufficient amount of some underlying quality, or whether, like the dog show example mentioned earlier, each genre of entertainment requires its own distinct set of skills according to unique stipulations. As Kingsbury notes about the shifting rubrics of talent in this way, "It might well be taken as a point of common sense that a single phenomenon cannot simultaneously 'be' drumming, singing, flower arranging, and basketball playing, so why don't people point to the polymorphism of talent as evidence that talent really doesn't exist?"⁸¹ Instead, the multiple manifestations of amateur skill on *AGT* are taken, somewhat tautologically, as evidence of the program's eponymous assertion of polymorphic talent—that it arises in multiple guises.

The Voice premiered on NBC in April of 2011. Unlike schadenfreude-fueling descendants of *The Gong Show* like *American Idol* and *America's Got Talent*, this most recent talent competition was designed to represent a more serious, realistic, and supposedly meritocratic portrayal of the process of discovering the next famous "voice." Rather than displaying a conspicuously polarized population of initial auditionees—the non-scaling or categorical definition of talent that portrays contestants either as talented or deceived, freakish, or otherwise apparently untalented—producers for *The Voice*

⁸⁰ Kingsbury, *Music Talent & Performance*, 81.

⁸¹ As Kingsbury explains, this variability in meaning "can be seen, for example, in the differences among piano playing, flute playing, and cello playing, enterprises that are so different from each other that it would be impossible to specify the traits of 'talent' that are common to all. Such a problem would only be increased by adding singing to the list, or drum playing or tuba playing." Kingsbury, *Music Talent & Performance*, 81.

actively recruit accomplished amateur singers as well as artists with nascent careers and fan followings. To signify the competition's dedication to judging "only a singer's voice," the first round of auditions are "blind" (for the celebrity judges, though not for live audiences or television viewers), only allowing judges to look at a contestant after they have decided that their voice possesses "potential." If more than one judge decides to turn, contestants are given agency to choose whom they will take on as their mentor. Indeed, this quest for the most fitting teacher loosely parallels processes in the professional musical realm; both Shinichi Suzuki and Mark O'Connor in Chapter 4, for instance, attested to the significance of their choice of teacher, having deliberated whom to "study under" for extended periods of time.

More so than *American Idol* and *America's Got Talent*, the format of *The Voice* claims to emphasize the necessity of teachers and mentors in the cultivation of talent, positioning the judges as coaches responsible for the success of their mentees, passing along lessons they have learned from their experiences in the industry. In a structural departure from the other two programs, celebrity panelists are not bystanders weighing in with their judgments; they are also competitors who receive accolades—and, indeed, significant career boosts of their own—if the season's overall winner was a member of their team. While this formal feature gestures at the importance of teachers in the process of creating a successful musician (or realizing a contestant's "potential"), the so-called coaching sessions that begin with the post-blind audition "battle rounds" display few established pedagogical techniques, such as those discussed in Chapter 4. Instead of addressing specific vocal techniques or revealing that any repetitive practice has taken place, most instances of "coaching" on the show tend to reify the understanding that a musician's talent is merely something that needs to be activated, as a stable trait rather than something constructed, practiced, and continually mutable.⁸²

⁸² Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has argued, "Talent cannot be a stable trait because individual capacity for action changes over the life-span, and cultural demands for performance change both over the life-span and over time within

Beyond of the context of any particular performance, the structure and design of *AI*, *AGT*, and *The Voice* portray musical talent as an objective fact, a fixed trait that is self-evident regardless of one's musical experience or expertise. In *American Idol*, contestants who pass the first round of auditions are handed a literal “golden ticket” signifying their impending journey to Hollywood.⁸³ Using a similarly golden symbol (reminiscent of Plato's Noble Lie, discussed in Chapter 1), later seasons of *America's Got Talent* give judges the option of pressing the “golden buzzer” once a season, when they are certain that a contestant possesses an exceptional amount of potential—that they are “made of gold.” In line with Natcharian's comments above, the golden buzzer operates like a mechanism in an educational tracking program, allowing particularly gifted contestants to pass through remedial rounds of the competition and head straight to the “live shows.” When pressed, the buzzer releases a veritable storm of golden confetti and lights, allowing these “gifted” performers to bask in the glory of the judges' legitimation. On *The Voice*, each judge is provided a red button that they push upon recognizing talent in the show's “blind audition” round, triggering the rotation of their chair that allows them to take a first look at their chosen contestant.

Judges' reactions to conspicuously unqualified contestants are also visually represented in various ways. Taking a cue from *The Gong Show*, judges on *America's Got Talent* hit a red button when they sense that an act is particularly devoid of potential; if all of the judges hit their buttons of rejection, the performer is denied the chance to complete the audition and immediately asked to leave. Each of these interactive elements offer an opportunity to represent otherwise largely imperceptible affective reactions to talent's presence. *American Idol* judges often throw multiple golden tickets in a fit of enthusiasm, and successful contestants brandish them proudly as they walk out; coaches on *The Voice* tenderly, emphatically, or hesitatingly press their buttons of approval.

each domain of performance.” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Systems Model of Creativity: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Berlin: Springer, 2014).

⁸³ The metaphor of the “golden ticket” first appeared in Roald Dahl's well-known novel, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

In summary, talent shows have endured as a popular and highly influential entertainment format, from Thomas Wiggins' era until the twenty-first century. These competitions have not only reinforced and popularized a particular conception of stochastically distributed, innate musical talent; they have also actively shaped and manipulated popular and educational discourses of ability development, encouraging untrained musicians to continue auditioning and millions of viewers to continue tuning in, voting, and investing (emotionally and economically) in narratives around the discovery and fulfillment of musical "potential." I discuss these discourses further in the following section.

Representing Talent on Reality TV

It is the very first audition of *The Voice's* 2017 season, and contestant Chris Weaver has crooned his way through the first eleven words of Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness" when the first chair turns.⁸⁴ The futuristic red throne immediately becomes illuminated from within and triggers a spotlight on its occupant, celebrity judge Adam Levine, as he prepares to behold the body belonging to the voice that just moved him. The rotation is activated by Levine's decisive punch of a big red button in front of him, which, when pressed, elicits a non-diegetic THWAP sound evocative of a video game or action movie, with enough added reverb to signify the consequential nature of a judge's decision to "turn for" a singer. Seconds later, judge Jennifer Hudson (a conspicuous beacon of promise for *The Voice's* aspiring stars as an *American Idol* winner and subsequently successful recording artist) smacks her big red button with a contemptuous glance toward Levine for beating her to the punch. The scene cuts to Weaver's family backstage, weeping and applauding as host Carson Daily congratulates them. Transitioning back to the performance, viewers see Levine, gazing at Weaver, rise to stand as though spiritually compelled upon the singer's completion of a

⁸⁴ Alan Carter, "Season 13, Episode 1." *The Voice* (NBC Television, September 25, 2017).

particularly soulful melisma on the word “tenderness.” Judge Miley Cyrus begins to dance in her chair, waving her arms suggestively over her red button, finally placing her hand on it softly before confirming her interest with a final push that spins her chair around. By the end of the audition, all four judges have turned to face the singer. Their first names are emblazoned on the backlit floor pointing up to the stage, and four “I WANT YOU” signs suggestively gleam in Weaver’s direction, emanating from the base of each platform.

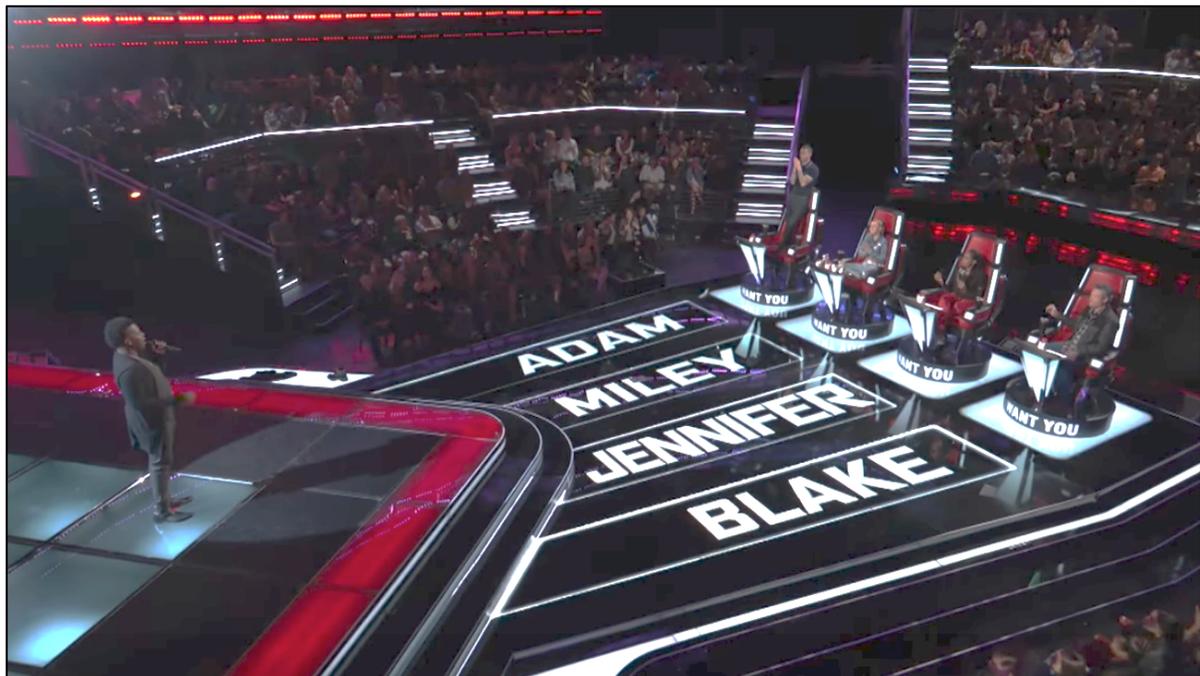


Figure 3.3: Chris Weaver Blind Audition, *The Voice*, Season 13.

The cheering subsides, the non-diegetic music fades out, and the four judges—now donning their figurative “coach” hats in *The Voice*’s signature power-dynamic flip (resembling myriad real-life admissions processes)—commence their campaign to win Weaver over for their team of contestants. The judges wander from their chairs, bicker, throw notebooks, and, in lieu of actual hats, throw shoes and jackets into the ring where Weaver stands. After the African American vocalist (described in his pre-audition mini-biopic as a worship leader by day and drag queen by night) tells Hudson that he sang for her once before, she looks at him intently and code switches

into African American vernacular English in a gesture of affinity, saying, “you sang me right up out this chair, you know that right?” Cyrus interjects, “I am so thirsty to win, I want to win. And I’ll do it with you.” Hudson continues, “Yes, you come from church, but God gave you that voice to sing far and beyond. I can help get you there.” After the show’s characteristic period of suspenseful deliberation, Weaver chooses “JHud,” who stands and belts out a musical exclamation of victory.

As this brief sketch illustrates, despite *The Voice’s* claim that contestants will be judged by the sound of their voice alone, vocal utterances are the tip of a highly produced, gendered, racialized, and otherwise ideologically loaded iceberg when it comes to representing musical talent for viewers, and so is the case for *American Idol* and *America’s Got Talent*. All three programs depict talent as a fixed trait that may be present in anyone and is recognizable to anyone, regardless of their musical education, cultural background, or genre preferences. Rather than explicitly associating talent with a fixed set of audible (or visual) musical skills, talent shows represent it as something that lurks beneath a musician’s performance, infusing but not constituting their technical abilities. In the following sections, I discuss three mechanisms that these programs employ to convey this definition of musical talent: in short, anti-talent, adversity, and affect.

Anti-talent

“It’s one of the worst auditions we’ve had this year if I’m being honest. Everything about it was grotesque. You can’t sing. You can’t dance. What do you want me to say?”⁸⁵

In the comment above, judge Simon Cowell’s informs now (in)famous *American Idol* contestant William Hung, who had just sung and danced his rendition of Ricky Martin’s “She Bangs,” that he is *unable* to sing and dance. Cowell’s response, a version of which he has unleashed on hundreds of contestants on several different programs, utilizes a conventionalized hyperbolic

⁸⁵ *American Idol*, Season 3, Episode 4. January 27, 2004.

trope surrounding creative endeavors in educational settings and otherwise: namely, that those without a high degree of ability (defined differently according to context) are not simply less practiced or proficient, but *unable* to sing, dance, draw, or act, for example. As in all instances of this trope, Cowell's comment does not operate simply as a figure of speech, but a figure of thought, as George Lakoff has observed, indicating a common conceptual framing of the nature of artistic skill: that one either *can* or *cannot* sing; one either has or does not have talent.⁸⁶ In this section, I analyze the construction of this divide through the portrayal of anti-talented contestants.⁸⁷ As we have seen, the practice of presenting and then rejecting comically incompetent performers on talent shows has a long historical genealogy, from the original Bowery Theater's hook to the *The Gong Show's* gong. In addition to satisfying viewers' schadenfreude (which Kristin Barton has found to be one of the most powerful draws for viewers), these intentionally extreme portrayals reflect and perpetuate the notion of an essential divide between the ostensible haves and have-nots of musical talent.⁸⁸

In her analysis of reality television's relationship with the popular music industry, Trajce Cvetkovski employed the term "anti-talent" to refer to television personalities who gain celebrity status not for extra-ordinary skills, but for their very ordinariness.⁸⁹ Because the premise of musical talent competitions involves helping aspiring musicians succeed in the music industry, Cvetkovski notes that anti-talented characters do not find the same success on these programs as in other reality formats.⁹⁰ I would argue, however, that although such anti-talented acts do not ultimately win as

⁸⁶ Lakoff, "A Figure of Thought."

⁸⁷ As *The Voice* has distanced itself from this practice by presenting only highly qualified singers in the first "blind" round of auditions, I am primarily addressing the ways *American Idol* and *America's Got Talent* apportion a wide range of musical abilities (and shortcomings) into these two categories. However, *The Voice's* omission of contestants without adequate training and experience, and obfuscation of the extended recruitment, pre-screening, and rehearsal processes that precede their televised performances, offers no explicit counterargument to the reigning non-scaling conception of talent addressed here. Rather, it essentially skips the first round of competition, leaving the existence of anti-talent implied.

⁸⁸ Kristin M. Barton, "Why We Watch Them Sing and Dance: The Uses and Gratifications of Talent-Based Reality Television," *Communication Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2013): 217–35.

⁸⁹ Trajce Cvetkovski, *The Pop Music Idol and the Spirit of Charisma: Reality Television Talent Shows in the Digital Economy of Hope* (Springer, 2015), 26.

⁹⁰ Cvetkovski, 22.

competitors, they are successful and essential in constructing the category of the “talented” contestant. Beyond ordinary and extra-ordinary, a number of other dichotomies influence the construction of “talented” performers; contestants represented as devoid of talent highlight particular musical lacks that those with talent are believed to possess—a lack of self-awareness, of vocal control, of a developed sense of rhythm or pitch, or other visual or dispositional qualities of a pop star. To extend Cvetkovsky’s use of the term and emphasize its dialectical quality, I also refer to such contestants as “anti-talented.” For viewers, anti-talent acts reveal “true talent,” rendering it all the more valuable and enchanting.⁹¹

Talent shows promote the concept of talent-as-potentiality as discussed in the first chapter; anti-talent is treated as synonymous with a lack of potential. In keeping with the programs’ amateur night roots, successful contestants are not (explicitly) expected to be the most practiced, polished, performance-ready professionals, but instead to demonstrate the “potential” to capitalize upon the program’s resources. As discussed in Chapter 1, rather than operating as a relatively egalitarian concept (“like all students, that musician possesses the potential to improve, provided educational resources and thoughtful practice”) musical potential here is understood as quality that some possess and many do not. This understanding of potentiality aligns with the “existing” rather than “generic” potentiality discussed in Chapter 1.⁹² The talent shows examined here ultimately perpetuate the Aristotelian idea that every object—in this case, contestant—possesses a “nature itself” with distinct allowances or possibilities that can be detected or imagined.

But what does this lack of potential look or sound like? Like successful contestants, anti-talent acts tend to fall into a set of identifiable groupings that can be seen as archetypal or

⁹¹ The cultivation of enchantment is intentional on these programs. As Darren McMahon noted about the treatment of inexplicable genius in a post-Weberian world, “Talk of possession and inspiration, as a consequence, tended to be even more enigmatic than it had been in a fully enchanted world.” I address the rendering of talent as a magical quality later in the chapter. McMahon, *Divine Fury*, 129.

⁹² Agamben and Heller-Roazen, *Potentialities*, 16.

stereotypical (depending on how one interprets these terms) of common understandings about people who do not possess musical potential.⁹³ In her study of *American Idol*, celebrity, and identity, Amanda McClain identifies and analyzes seven main archetypes of (successful) contestants who have appeared on that program: girl and guy next door, rockers, R&B singers, urban singers, Blue-eyed Soul singers, country singers, and singer-songwriters.⁹⁴ I would argue that anti-talented contestants could be categorized analogously.⁹⁵ Several common anti-talent archetypes are worth mentioning here, though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyze the musical characteristics of each: the culturally and musically inept immigrant (for instance, William Hung on *AI*'s Season 3, or an Indian couple who called themselves “Rak and Tak” on Season 6 of *AGT*); the overconfident and aggressive singer (Kirsten Powell from the first season of *AI*, or Kayvond Zand from *AGT* Season 10)⁹⁶; the earnest, socially and musically awkward reject (Nick Zitzmann, discussed below); the over-the-top, ridiculous performer (General Larry Platt, from *AI* Season 9, who sang his original song, “Pants on the Ground”); the attractive and confident yet surprisingly incompetent singer (Katrina Darrell from *AI* Season 9); and on *AGT*, which has no age limit, the older contestant without the required dose of youthful potential (Big Barry from Season 7).

⁹³ Lule describes archetypes as “patterns, images, motifs, and characters taken from and shaped by the shared experience of human life, that have helped structure and shape stories across cultures and eras.” Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (Guilford Press, 2001). Dyer discusses stereotypes as “taken to express a general agreement about a social group...and express particular definitions of reality, with concomitant evaluations, which in turn relate to the distribution of power within society.

⁹⁴ While McClain discusses variations of each of these archetypes according to gender and other factors, these are the main categories she presents. She notes, importantly, that these archetypes “represent American cultural standards and the current status quos of class, beauty, sexuality, and race” while stifling “the possibility of exploring issues of oppression and inequality.” McClain, *American Ideal*. See section, “Contestant Archetypes,” pages 39-90.

⁹⁵ There are a number of ways one could construct that typology, however—according to specific lacunae in contestants’ musical skills, their personality and social conduct more broadly, or their musically-punctuated performance of a particular negative racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic stereotype, for instance.

⁹⁶ While there is little space to explain here, the global popularity of amateur karaoke singing offers a number of insights into several anti-talent archetypes as well as the participatory amateur musical culture that has rendered such reality programs so successful more generally. Xun Zhou and Francesca Tarocco, *Karaoke: The Global Phenomenon* (Reaktion Books, 2013); Brian Raftery, *Don’t Stop Believin’: How Karaoke Conquered the World and Changed My Life* (Da Capo Press, 2008).

Regardless of anti-talented contestants' archetypical and musical characteristics, their decision to audition betrays a lack of musical (and often holistic) metacognition: the ability to monitor one's learning process, self-evaluate one's abilities, and adjust accordingly.⁹⁷ In auditions, this lack of metacognition often presents as overconfidence and unrealistic expectations of success. Psychologists Dunning and Kruger have found that a lack of metacognition in individuals represents a "dual burden: not only do these people reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the metacognitive ability to realize it."⁹⁸ This self-perpetuating phenomenon of unskillfulness and unawareness (known as the Dunning-Kruger effect) is so common on musical talent competitions, where judges like Cowell berate contestants just as much for their delusions of musical grandeur as their lack of musical ability, that one psychologist has referred to a musically specific version of the phenomenon as "The American Idol Effect."⁹⁹ While metacognitive skills are often understood to be an immutable aspect of one's personality, both on these programs and in educational contexts, recent research into social-emotional educational processes has increasingly revealed how metacognitive strategies, among other "non-cognitive" skills required for effective learning habits, are quite teachable, but have simply not been recognized or addressed in traditional educational settings.¹⁰⁰ Regardless of this, a lack of metacognition is portrayed as the ultimate signifier of anti-talent on these shows.

To consider the ways archetypes of anti-talent shape viewer perceptions of talented acts, take the example of Nicholas Zitzmann, a 27-year-old white software engineer from Midvale, Utah. In

⁹⁷ James C. Kaufman, Michelle L. Evans, and John Baer, "The American Idol Effect: Are Students Good Judges of Their Creativity across Domains?," *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 3–17. Of course, there are surely contestants who audition knowing that they do not have a chance to win the competition, but despite the judges' occasional interrogation into a contestant's seriousness, *AI* and *AGT* never show footage of contestants admitting that they auditioned merely for a few minutes of fame. This omission further

⁹⁸ Justin Kruger and David Dunning, "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments," 2013.

⁹⁹ Kaufman, Evans, and Baer, "The American Idol Effect."

¹⁰⁰ Cite our paper with UChicago Consortium and Ingenuity, forthcoming: "Arts Education and Socio-Emotional Learning Outcomes among K-12 Students: Developing a Theory of Action" as well as other metacognition/arts studies

response to the judges' habitual question about why he believes he is the next American Idol, Zitzmann responded, "I am a leader. I can project myself real well. I can keep on key. In choir situations I've been in, I've been kind of the leader voice." Zitzmann proceeds to sing Simon's favorite song (which Abdul notes, and the singer confirms he had known), the Righteous Brothers' version of "Unchained Melody," a selection which lent the spectacle further irony as an iconic prototype of the original "blue-eyed soul" genre. Musically, Zitzmann's self-assessment was not incorrect: without an initial pitch reference, he sang in the same key as the original recording (if about a quarter-tone lower), and did not stray from that tonal center despite the song's expansive range. Indeed, in his pre-audition interview, he correctly identified the highest and lowest notes in the song, singing them instantly, indicating his possession of perfect pitch (or something like it). In his audition, Zitzmann's melody was rhythmically accurate and indicated a steady internal sense of pulse—for example, in the last line of the first verse, "a long, lonely time," he held "time" for a full two measures, the same number of beats before the next phrase begins on the Righteous Brothers recording.¹⁰¹ Rather than standing still, he swayed back and forth as he sang.

Both Zitzmann's preliminary self-assessment and performance, however, betray not just a lack of certain skills, but a lack of awareness about these many other musical and non-musical elements valued in popular music culture beyond the "textbook" musical issues to which he attended, such as vocal range, timbre and tone, pitch, rhythm, and even movement. Afterwards, Cowell informed Zitzmann that his performance was "one of the worst I ever heard. It was almost non-human." This comment about Zitzmann's humanity is reminiscent of a certain genre of responses to Thomas Wiggins discussed in the previous chapter. Although the contestant displayed a number of skills the judges identified as problematically absent in other auditions, he did not

¹⁰¹ In the original recording, the final four beats of this phrase contain rests, but Zitzmann's choice to extend the note is a fairly common practice for vocalists in audition situations looking for ways to display their vocal sustain on higher notes.

display certain emotional, expressive, timbral, and otherwise intuitive sonic characteristics of successful contestants. These qualities of his performance led numerous online commentators to hypothesize that he may have Asperger's syndrome.¹⁰² I discuss the function of disability in each program's portrayal of exceptional ability in a subsequent section, but it is interesting to note that Zitzmann's evident musico-social challenges are not championed and romanticized in this case, but ridiculed. Unlike other visibly disabled or otherwise flawed artists who possess isolated and unexpected pockets of exceptional ability, the judges deemed Zitzmann's lack of musical metacognition irredeemable in their assessment of his potentiality. Indeed, these programs draw a fine line between the categories of pathetic "wannabe" and inspiring underdog. In drawing this line, they privilege a subset of musical competencies rarely taught or described explicitly, such as timbre, tone, inflections, context-specific nuances of timing and movement. Susan Boyle, a contestant on *Britain's Got Talent* who was also diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome following her successful audition (viewed hundreds of millions of times online), fell on the other side of divide. Despite interactional idiosyncrasies that initially marked her as an anti-talent act and reported shortcomings in her vocal technique, audiences celebrated her performance as a triumph—as evidence of an unexpected talent within an otherwise unremarkable being, or, as one article put it, "a diamond in the rough."¹⁰³ Unlike Boyle, Zitzmann was unable to identify and perform these most valued musical components of a successful audition; rather than serving as a symbol of overcoming (which in some ways, it likely was), his singing ability was received by the judges as a symptom of a holistic and hopeless metacognitive lack.

¹⁰² For one example see, "Bad Singers on American Idol Autistic?! | Wrong Planet Autism Community Forum," accessed April 12, 2018, <http://wrongplanet.net/forums/viewtopic.php?p=453587>. For a discussion of metacognition and Aspergers Syndrome, see Tiziana Zalla et al., "Metacognition of Agency and Theory of Mind in Adults with High Functioning Autism," *Consciousness and Cognition* 31 (January 2015): 126–38.

¹⁰³ Iris Erlingsdottir, "Susan Boyle: The Diamond in the Rough," *Huffington Post* (blog), May 19, 2009, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/iris-lee/the-diamond-in-the-rough_b_188642.html.

It is also valuable to approach Zitzmann's performance of anti-talent from a critical race studies perspective. Although the pool of successful contestants from each program's audition round constitutes a veritable rainbow of racial, ethnic, and regional diversity that promotes the program's idealistic multiculturalist and individualist ideology, first-round anti-talent slots are assigned to white contestants more often than any other demographic group.¹⁰⁴ This decision likely stems in part from producers' desire to avoid being charged with perpetuating negative racial and ethnic stereotypes to the programs' (predominantly white) viewership.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, however, Zitzmann's audition invokes a racialized conception of innate talent that hearkens back to earlier constructions of musical ability discussed in the previous two chapters.¹⁰⁶ Zitzmann offered an categorically "nerdy" performance of a song with a history that epitomizes pop music's far-reaching appropriation of African American stylistic norms—to such an extent that pop performances that do not engage in a certain degree of such stylistic appropriation become marked as "white" (a comparatively rare occurrence of markedness for whiteness).¹⁰⁷ In other words, perhaps what Zitzmann's rendition of "Unchained Melody" lacked was the "soul" component of the song's originary "blue-eyed soul" style. As in the American popular music industry more broadly, white singers who emulate characteristically African-American vocal styles are frequently celebrated in televised talent competitions.¹⁰⁸ *American Idol* winner Taylor Hicks epitomizes this archetype, among

¹⁰⁴ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (U of Minnesota Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁵ Jungmin Lee, "American Idol: Evidence of Same-Race Preferences?" SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, February 1, 2006), 24. In one of *American Idol*'s most popular seasons, Lee found that white viewers outnumbered black viewers, for instance, almost 6 to 1.

¹⁰⁶ As I discussed in the previous chapter, innate musicality—though not musical creativity—was frequently attributed to members of the African diaspora by European and European-American observers. To cite Jefferson as an archetypal example, "In music they are generally more gifted than whites with accurate ears for tune and time." Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

¹⁰⁷ I describe Zitzmann as "nerdy" in the sense Bucholtz has discussed, designating a particularly marked performance of whiteness and rejection of "coolness" that involves the use of superstandard English—a linguistic behavior that for which many musical analogues exist. See Mary Bucholtz, "The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (June 28, 2008): 84–100.

¹⁰⁸ Reebee Garofalo, "Culture Versus Commerce: The Marketing of Black Popular Music," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 275–87.

many others, as McClain and others have discussed.¹⁰⁹ Just as the concept of “cool” itself originated in African American culture and was eventually appropriated and deracialized (becoming no longer marked as African American) into the mainstream, all of the popular music genres showcased on these talent competitions—from country and rock to soul and R&B—incorporate partially or fully deracialized stylistic norms inherited from black musical traditions.¹¹⁰ In addition to its other technical oversights, Zitzmann’s audition conspicuously omits these stylistic markers, performing a musical version of what linguistic anthropologist Mary Bucholtz has dubbed “hyperwhiteness.”¹¹¹ In all—his neglect of important but often implicitly learned vocal skills, his performance of un-cool hyperwhiteness—Zitzmann inadvertently epitomizes an anti-talent antithesis, offering the program a counterexample for its definition of pop-musical potential.

Occasionally, contestants categorized as anti-talented manage to challenge and complicate the programs’ paradigmatic dichotomy. Instead of conceding to the programs’ particular definition of musical talent, contestants assert their own understanding—discursive struggles that achieve varying degrees of success on each program (though never winning outright), ultimately serving as thought-provoking exceptions that prove the rule of each program’s dominant definition. Importantly, however, these contestants provide a stage for discursive struggles over musical talent’s signifiers that purposely cater to a wide range of American perspectives, true to reality television’s discursive norms, which aim to reflect the dominant meanings of its audience to be successful and compatible with the lives of its viewers.¹¹² This diversity of anti-talent in the first rounds of *AI* and *AGT* provide a venue for viewers to engage with and advocate for *all* of the talent types discussed in

¹⁰⁹ To offer a few more of the more conspicuous examples, take Samothias in *American Idol* (Season 16), whom Lionel Richie compared to Prince (and had bright blue eyes, to literalize the “blue-eyed soul” label); the winner first season of *America’s Got Talent*, Bianca Ryan, who commented, “People say when I sing, a black woman’s ghost just got into your body”; or, in the telling case of *The Voice*’s blind auditions, Stevie Jo sang (Season 6), to whom Adam Levine commented after turning his chair, “I was pretty sure you weren’t a white guy.”

¹¹⁰ Bucholtz, “The Whiteness of Nerds,” 86.

¹¹¹ Bucholtz, 86.

¹¹² Su Holmes and Deborah Jermy, *Understanding Reality Television* (Psychology Press, 2004).

Chapter 1 through cheering and voting for contestants who embody particular meanings that align with their beliefs and experiences.¹¹³



Figure 3.4: Dave the Horn Guy, *America's Got Talent*, Season 1.

Another white male contestant from the first season of *America's Got Talent* named “Dave the Horn Guy” provides an illustrative example. Wearing an orange jump suit, sunglasses, and twenty-five chromatically tuned bulb horns on various parts of his body, the contestant’s performance of two original arrangements involved rhythmically complex contrapuntal melodic textures as well as quickly shifting chords of up to three voices that required swift and precise full-body movements—squeezing his armpits, bending his knees, and using his hands to squeeze horns placed around his torso. Dave supplemented the full-body movements already required by his horn blowing with stylized dance moves as well as a beat-boxing accompaniment. In short, the performance was highly imaginative, physically demanding, technically complex, and was evidently

¹¹³ In referring to “discursive struggles” I am referencing a theory of discourse forwarded by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in which struggle at the discursive level contribute to individuals’ understandings of social reality. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony And Socialist Strategy*; Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*.

the result of a level of music-theoretical knowledge, repetitive practice, and awareness of stage presence comparable to the several singers in the same episode who received enthusiastic accolades.

After this performance, the reliably critical British judge Piers Morgan commented, “I don’t mean to be unfair to you but I’ve traveled thousands of miles to try and find the next great American talent. If you don’t mind me saying, you belong on the end of a pier. Or preferably off the end of the pier.”¹¹⁴ Morgan’s hyperbolic assertion that Dave the Horn Guy did not qualify as the “the next great American talent” points to an implicit hierarchy of talent(s) forwarded on the variety show-style program. Representing a different subset of viewers—indeed, many members of the live audience had been cheering enthusiastically—Judge Brandy Norwood challenged Morgan’s judgment with an alternative definition, proposing that uniqueness and some amount of musical knowledge was essential to her understanding of musical talent: “Not too many people can do what Dave just did. I was entertained, and I felt like you could play in harmony.” Although Norwood and Hasselhoff ultimately voted to send him to the next round of the competition, Dave was eliminated in a subsequent round. This particular debate over Dave’s talent—to summon the types discussed in Chapter 1, between talent as passion and cultivation versus talent as an innate gift and an affectively impactful experience—is just one example of the ways that reactions to anti-talented contestants provoke and represent larger discursive struggles over talent’s meaning.

America’s Got Talent also offers a number of opportunities to explore judges’ and audiences’ beliefs about the polymorphism of talent. Perhaps the most revealing are the non-human acts, necessitating a foray into what we might call animal ability studies. In the first season, for instance, an act featuring “Wildlife Wendy” and her African Gray parrot named Wazoo performed for judges Brandy Norwood, Piers Morgan, and David Hasselhoff. The act featured a wide range of sounds—or sound effects—that Wazoo produced for the microphone in response to prompts from Wendy:

¹¹⁴ *America’s Got Talent*, Episode 101, June 21, 2006.

“What’s your name?” “Wazoo!” “There’s someone at the door.” Knocking sound. “I think you’re scoring big on a video game!” Pew pew! “Is there water dripping?” Dripping sound. “What do you say if the judges vote us off?” The sound of blowing a raspberry. While frequent cuts to the auditorium indicated that the audience was entertained, clapping and laughing as Wazoo produced a variety of realistic sounds on command, Piers Morgan “buzzed” Wazoo (or was it Wendy?) just a few parrot vocalizations into the act. Afterwards, Morgan explains his reaction, telling Wendy, “I want to find the next Frank Sinatra or Madonna.” Wendy, pushing back on his narrow definition of talent, retorted, “Then do a singing show. Don’t ask for animal acts.”

The example of Wendy and Wazoo also presents a nuanced critique of the program’s underlying assertion about talent. Regarding the question of Wazoo’s talent, musical or otherwise, Morgan informed Wendy that he was unimpressed, that it is parrots’ nature to imitate sounds, and therefore they cannot possess some innate sense of musicality essential to his conception of talent. He concluded, “if I was left with your parrot for an hour I could teach it to say things.” Wendy and Wazoo did not get voted to the next round. After leaving the stage, Wendy insisted, “This is not just a singing show, there are other kinds of talent and there aren’t any other birds on this show doing what she’s doing. You can’t teach a bird to do this for an hour. This was eleven years of training.” If talent is something that exists prior to an act of training, are animals incapable of possessing talent? In the case of Wendy, was the talent being displayed the act of training itself? In that case, whether the trainee was an animal or a human is largely irrelevant. To take this line of reasoning further, perhaps the most radical argument of Wendy’s audition is that trainers and teachers are an essential element of the circumstance that begets talent—a discourse of talent surely shared by some percentage of the program’s viewers. As Wendy insisted at the very end of her segment, “This is a true talent. Birds don’t train themselves.”

Some anti-talented contestants challenge the judges' definition of talent with their commentary rather than their musical abilities. The audition of Season 3 *American Idol* contestant Kristen Powell offers one particularly illustrative example. Stripping off a pair of tear-away sweatpants to reveal short-shorts and legwarmers for her audition, Powell performed a selection from *Flash Dance* (1983), dancing vigorously and tossing her head back and forth while singing. Perhaps the most obvious signifier of Powell's anti-talent was located in her inability to control her chest voice—both in terms of regulating her airflow while dancing, and in terms of being able to achieve a tonally stable and timbrally privileged “singing” rather than “shouting” sound through manipulating her vocal tract.¹¹⁵ After Powell's brief performance, Cowell immediately responded by inquiring about her “seriousness,” implicitly inquiring into her metacognitive abilities.¹¹⁶ Rather than conceding to the judges' pronouncement, Powell pushed back: “I realize I'm not that perfect person. But you look at some people that are out there, and you put synthesizers and you drown them out with music and you pay them a ton. Take me, put synthesizers with me, give me a choreographer, give me a trainer, I want to be out there.” This challenge summons the first category of potentiality discussed previously: the potential to be crafted into a successful performer through some combination of education, management, and investment of capital, regardless of the supposedly innate or natural skills she possesses. In a piece of post-audition footage Kristen's friend reassures her that she is talented—an assertion that the judges are looking for something that does not actually exist in so concrete or objective a form as they might think. As Randy commented, “it doesn't matter what we put you with, it's not going to work. You ain't got it.” Powell's pushback also

¹¹⁵ It should be noted that certain aspects of Powell's performance did adhere to certain standards of “talent” discussed on the show. For example, her pitches were not only diatonically accurate despite their shakiness and , but her key of B-flat was the same as that of the original song.

¹¹⁶ Interestingly, although Powell insisted that she was serious to Cowell, a few dedicated truth-sleuthing *AI* fans indignantly revealed later on that “Flashdance Girl” was a “fake,” citing a confession on a local radio station that she accepted a bet by the show's DJ. “Kristin Powell- A Fake! :: American Idol (Past Seasons) «idolforums.Com,” accessed March 14, 2018, <https://idolforums.com/index.php?showtopic=84429>.

questions talent's position as a gift or a commodity, discussed in Chapter 1: whether it is something bestowed previous to its entry into the popular music market or something that results primarily from the direct investment of capital. As Powell said before the end of her segment of the episode, affirming her possession of a more commodifiable type of talent, "You better believe that some day, I'm going to make somebody a lot of money, including myself."¹¹⁷

Adversity

Sixteen-year-old singer Calysta Bevier appeared to be an ordinary teenager with a pixie cut when she stepped onto the stage for her *America's Got Talent* audition in 2016. After the program's customary pre-audition conversation transitioned to the contestant's pre-filmed mini-biopic, viewers learn that Bevier's short hair is actually an emblem of her recent struggle with stage 3 ovarian cancer. Bevier described how singing was a source of comfort and strength when she was bound to a hospital bed, declaring, "Songs can really help people through any situation." Bevier's mother asserted, "She's a fighter. I look at her and I think, oh my gosh, you're so much stronger than I am," connecting this strength to her seemingly medicinal musical abilities by adding, "There is something special with her voice."¹¹⁸ The teenager recalled that the news of her remission "motivated me to want to do more with singing." Before launching into a heartfelt rendition of Rachel Platten's "Fight Song," Bevier declared, "I came here to show people, no matter where you came from or what you've gone through, to keep chasing your dreams."¹¹⁹ After the singer's emotional and technically

¹¹⁷ *American Idol* Season 3 Episode 2, January 20, 2004.

¹¹⁸ Russell Norman, "Episode 1104," *America's Got Talent* (NBC Television, June 21, 2016).

¹¹⁹ Repertoire choice is also an essential element of the representation of talent. In addition to needing to show off a contestant's vocal strengths and complement their tessitura, they are also most effective when their musical and lyrical content is rousing and sentimental. As David Metzger has noted about power ballads, "Power ballads have become a prominent part of the soundtrack of popular culture. Reality TV talent shows like *AI*, *X Factor*, and *The Voice* feature the songs. They treat power ballads like grist, using them throughout the early rounds and then showcasing a particular one during the final episode. *American Idol* had a new song composed to crown the winner, usually a power ballad appropriately about dreams and victory." David Metzger, *The Ballad in American Popular Music: From Elvis to Beyoncé* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 162.

proficient vocal performance, Simon Cowell hit the golden buzzer—a spectacular visual symbol of his approval—performing the response expected of viewers in saying, “I think you’re truly special. I’ve just got this really incredible feeling about you.” In a subsequent audition, judge Heidi Klum exclaimed to Bevier, “you’re not a human, you are a super-human.” In stark contrast to anti-talented (and never visibly disabled) artists like Nick Zitzmann, presented and sometimes explicitly described as sub-human or non-human, Bevier’s musical talent was authenticated and animated by her uplifting narrative of overcoming. Rather than being represented as a relatively human process of skill development accessible to many, her musical ability rendered her super-human.

In *AI*, *AGT*, and *The Voice* alike, displays of exceptional musical ability are invariably accompanied by stirring accounts of contestants’ experiences of disability, tragedy, or other form of adversity. It is not an exaggeration to state that every (non-anti-talented) contestant on these programs is armed with an emotionally charged backstory, though producers sometimes go to great lengths to locate something in a performer’s story that fulfills this implicit requirement. (For instance, *The Voice* Season 4 winner Danielle Bradbery tenderly confessed, “growing up, I was teased because I had crooked teeth.”¹²⁰) In his recent article on narratives of disability on reality singing competitions, William Cheng argues that contestants’ musical abilities “function as putative counterweights to physical, neurological, or social deviance,” describing the programs’ perpetually inspirational portrayals of disability as a “narrative prosthesis” through which they turn “stories of plight into profit.”¹²¹ Cheng’s study demonstrated how discourses of disability and musicality on these talent competition programs resonate with existing conversations in disability studies (especially sports) around the “supercrip”—an allegorical figure that, in the words of Jan Grue, is defined by the “rationalization and legitimization of impairments as positive attributes,” and the

¹²⁰ Alan Carter, “Season 4, Episode 1,” *The Voice* (NBC Television, March 25, 2013).

¹²¹ Cheng, “Staging Overcoming.” 187.

representation of those impairments as responsible for remarkable achievements and affirmative transformations.¹²² Others have commented on the exploitative nature of such displays. New York Times journalist Frank Bruni described such displays as “fetishized misfortune” and “hardship porn,” and Julie Beck has noted in *The Atlantic* that “Watching *The Voice* blind auditions is like repeatedly stabbing yourself with an EpiPen filled with the diluted essence of the feeling you get watching your little sister open a college-acceptance letter. *She made it; she deserves it.*”¹²³

It is clear, then, that talent competition programs’ musically oriented supercrip narratives have exploitatively, paradoxically, and problematically presented impairment as a source of strength and inspiration. Here, I am interested in the persistent pairing of disability and exceptional ability from the opposite angle: rather than considering the impact of talent narratives on conceptions of disability, I hope to consider the impact of disability narratives on conceptions of talent. In the programs examined here, physical (and only rarely cognitive) impairment is one of many genres of adversity talented contestants experience, including sickness or disease (as in Bevier’s case); anxiety and depression; the death or near-death of loved ones; difficult coming-out stories and other crises of identity; incidents with bullying; struggles with poverty; homelessness; unemployment; and myriad other negative experiences—down to the social affliction of crooked teeth. Producers likely include these formulaic, sensationalist narratives as a tested means of generating empathy and boosting viewership; indeed, particularly moving stories attached to technically proficient and expressive musical performances reach online view counts in the hundreds of millions. The result, however, is the representation of adverse experience as synonymous with the discovery of an innate musical aptitude.¹²⁴ Rather than being the result of educational opportunities and repetitive practice, musical

¹²² Grue, “The Problem of the Supercrip: Representation and Misrepresentation of Ability.”

¹²³ Frank Bruni, “Show Us Your Woe,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 2013, sec. SR3; Julie Beck, “The Voice’s Empty Promise of the American Dream,” *The Atlantic*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/03/the-voice-and-the-american-dream/520884/>.

¹²⁴ Maria Elizabeth Grabe, Shuhua Zhou, and Brooke Barnett, “Explicating Sensationalism in Television News: Content and the Bells and Whistles of Form,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 45, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 637.

talent becomes a seemingly magically materializing side-effect of adversity and overcoming, some form of cosmic compensation for a difficult experience.¹²⁵ In addition to serving as viewer-accruing “hardship porn,” such portrayals further naturalize musical ability as a concept, separating it from the means by which it was actually acquired and posing it instead as an immaculate conception, a “gift” that adversity unlocks.

Season 11 *America’s Got Talent* contestant Jayna Brown was introduced on the program as a young singer who had been inspired by her mother’s voice, and also by all of the difficult sacrifices she has made as a single mom—a statement already introducing a conflation of musical ability and struggle. A few moments into the pre-audition interview, the teenager noted how she and her mother had recently lost their home in Atlanta. The biopic concluded with the singer’s admission that the audition, and the potential prize for winners, “means the world for me and my mom” (in her subsequent appearance, she noted that she wanted to “pay [her mother] back” and buy her a house if she wins).¹²⁶ Just before her performance begins, Brown pledged, “I’m going to sing my heart out.” And with a subtle scoop into an A b₄, the 14 year-old launched into a bright, resonant, R&B-inflected rendition of the well-known song “Summertime” with controlled vibrato, a smattering of harmonically-informed runs, and climactic belted passages and growls alternating with more tender moments in a controlled head voice. Afterwards, with inspirational non-diegetic music and scenes of standing ovations confirming that Brown’s heart had indeed been sung out, judge Heidi Klum called her “fearless” and Howie Mandel remarked that she sounded “so far beyond her years,” summoning a correlation he had explicitly stated in other episodes between a vocally

¹²⁵ Interestingly, in the case of *AGT*, significantly fewer successful non-musical acts are accompanied by these narratives of adversity—focusing instead on the reasons they became interested in pursuing their talent, and their previous professional experiences.

¹²⁶ Brown’s understanding of displaying her talent as a way of “giving back” and demonstrating the emotional depth of her gratefulness to her mother relates to Chapter 1’s discussion of talent itself as a gift. As Steven Best has pointed out, gift exchange always involves “residues of desire and passion, emotional and spiritual content.”

“mature” sound and trying life experiences. As is typical of all three programs, there is no explicit discussion of the singer’s vocal strengths, specific techniques, or music-educational experiences.¹²⁷ Ultimately, therefore, viewers are invited to conclude that Brown’s musical exceptionalism, though likely cultivated to some degree, was fundamentally constituted and nourished by her struggles and her desire to overcome them through the act of singing. In conversations online, fans’ abundant declarations that Brown “deserved” to win introduced similar slippage around the source of her worthiness—whether it stemmed from her carefully practiced singing ability and stage presence or her “strength” and “bravery” in the face of difficult life circumstances.¹²⁸

Mandy Harvey from Season 12 of *America’s Got Talent* serves as a particularly extreme example of these programs’ representation of talent as animated by (and logistically transcendent of) a performer’s physical or emotional setbacks. A connective tissue disorder gradually caused the contestant to lose her hearing when she was a teenager; she became entirely deaf during her freshman year in a music education program. After realizing that deafness should not prevent her from pursuing her dream, Harvey explained that she retrained herself to sing using visual tuners and sensing the vibration of her musical accompaniment. Beethovenian references aside, Harvey’s deafness—often understood as the literal dis-ability to participate in musical experience—is portrayed, paradoxically and somewhat supernaturally, as an event that finally released her true musical talent.¹²⁹ As Harvey remarked in her pre-audition mini-biopic, “I’ve realized that my life

¹²⁷ Brown had acquired a great amount of performance experience from a young age. As a biography written just after her *AGT* appearance details, “Jayna has taken piano, dance, voice and acting lessons. At the age of 10 is when Jayna started to take her career serious. [...] She worked with Tyler Perry on one of his plays called ‘Madea’s Neighbors From Hell.’ She ended up touring with the biggest kids brands in the United States, Kids Bop from 12 to 13 years old. She has opened up for Grammy artists like Jennifer Holiday and the Wooten Brothers. She has performed on the Queen Latifah show and has been booked to perform in countless cities around the US. She is a youtube sensation with millions of views and over 75,000 subscribers among other things. She was just recently a Semi Finalist on Season 11 of Americas Got Talent.” “Jayna Brown,” GigSalad, accessed May 3, 2018, https://www.gigsalad.com/jayna_brown_atlanta.

¹²⁸ Anthony Ying, *Americas Got Talent 2016 Jayna Brown 14 Y.O. Sings a Classic Full Audition Clip S11E04*, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfgYL4RXnsc>.

¹²⁹ Here I am describing the way deafness is being represented on *America’s Got Talent*, and do not mean to imply that deaf musicians and audiences do not participate in a rich array of musical experiences. For a helpful discussion of this

doesn't need sound, music doesn't need sound, you just need heart, you need to feel, you need to touch it." Howie Mandel summarized the judges' responses after Harvey's performance, telling her, "You transcend hearing...you make music more powerful than it is." Here, Harvey's disability is not only portrayed as a stable trait that was always already inside of her, but one that was triumphantly unencumbered by her deafness. As Harvey reflected in the lyrics to the original song she performed in her audition, "There is no one for me to blame / 'cause I know the only thing in my way is me."¹³⁰



Figure 3.5: David Francisco on *American Idol*.



Figure 3.6: Kechi Okwuchi on *America's Got Talent*.

Anti-talented contestants are rarely provided extensive backstories that affectively prepare viewers for their musical performances of overcoming with narratives of adversity. Therefore, the introduction of a visibly impaired contestant acts as a harbinger of their possession of talent—to the extent that the qualities of their musical performance are often taken for granted and left unmentioned. Season 16 *American Idol* contestant David Francisco (Figure 3.5) told the panel of judges (in his audition and another mini-biopic) how he had been hit by a car, becoming paralyzed from the waist down and crying “every single day for months.” After the contestant performed

tension between hearing and deaf musical cultures, see Jeanette DiBernardo Jones, “Imagined Hearing,” *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, December 10, 2015.

¹³⁰ Mandy Harvey – Try, accessed June 27, 2018, <https://genius.com/Mandy-harvey-try-lyrics>.

Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely," his fiancé and Katy Perry wipe away tears and Lionel Richie informs him that he is an "inspiration to us all." Without a single mention of his musical performance, the judges hand Francisco a golden ticket, a symbol of his talent.

When *America's Got Talent* Season 12 contestant Kechi Okwuchi (Figure 3.6), a Houston resident originally from Nigeria stepped onto the stage, her experience of adversity could not be overlooked. She explained that she began singing seriously after she survived a plane crash that took the lives of all but two passengers. While lying in the hospital bed without being able to use or move her burned and broken body, she recalled that "music was an escape. I sang every single day." She concluded, "It gives me this hope that maybe something is supposed to come out of this that I never expected... I draw strength from it." Okwuchi then performed Ed Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud," receiving thunderous applause and a standing ovation well before she began the final chorus. After her second performance, Cowell commented, perhaps in response to critiques such as those mentioned above, "you deserved your place here tonight, not just based on your story, but on your talent." Indeed, Cowell voiced this endorsement of Okwuchi's talent precisely because the programs' contestant choices quite transparently appear to be the very opposite: these contestants were not selected because of their musical abilities, but because of their stories.

Instead of asking whether these contestants would be "talented" enough to be measured by some objective standard without their visible disabilities or moving narratives of adversity, I propose that the notion of talent forwarded by these programs cannot be detached from such narratives of overcoming.¹³¹ While some types of musical talent discussed in Chapter 1 are indeed explicitly linked with sonic signifiers, talent competition programs assert a fundamentally different definition of

¹³¹ For instance: "Would Mandy have gotten the Golden Buzzer if she had been a *hearing* person who simply came out and performed a song she had written herself?" "Mandy Harvey 'Tried' – And Succeeded. And Yet..." *Deaf Pagan Crossroads* (blog), June 9, 2017, <https://deafpagancrossroads.com/2017/06/08/mandy-harvey-tried-and-succeeded-and-yet/>.

musical talent—and music itself—that is only somewhat defined by sound. Rather, musical talent is not located within the performer, but in the affective process of listening. A musical performer’s celebrity is never realistically divorced from her identity, appearance, or story of adversity; neither is her talent. In other words, talent shows equate musical talent with older, more literal meanings of exceptional and extraordinary—as unique, not typical or ordinary. As I discuss more in the following section, at the heart (more so than the ear, or mind) of this definition of talent is affective experience.

Affect

“*That* is what we came for. I feel like we been flying all around this country for that. That thing that can’t even be put in words. That thing that gives everybody chills and goosebumps. I’m so happy you did that.”¹³²

In this quotation, *American Idol* celebrity judge Nicki Minaj describes her reaction to the audition of contestant Burnell Taylor, who had just performed “I’m Here” from *The Color Purple*. Minaj’s comment, accompanied by fits of giddy laughter from Keith Urban, tears from Mariah Carey, and a rhapsodic “Yes! Yes!” from Randy Jackson, summarizes one of these programs’ most prominent assertions about musical talent: its presence is not detected through a rubric that assesses specific musical skills as such, but through listeners’ affective responses. As is often the case, the musical skills Taylor displayed which might be identified as signifiers of “potential”—largely accurate intonation, gospel-influenced ornamentations, full-bodied projection, an apparent ease of movement and expressivity with his eyes and his body, a unique stylistic interpretation of a familiar and emotionally charged song—were not specifically cited by the judges as something that stood out for them. Instead, these skills are lumped together and portrayed as symptoms of that underlying, originary “thing” as Minaj puts it, which itself evokes chills, goosebumps, giddy laughter, tears, and

¹³² Burnell Taylor audition, Season 12, Episode 4. January 24, 2013.

strong emotions. Taylor’s audition exhibited the presence of “that thing” for each of the four judges. As Carey declared after his performance, “I *felt* every word you sang.”¹³³ In basing their appraisals of talent not on specific musical accomplishments but on their own reactions, the judges here are defining talent according to its “impact,” to name one of the meanings analyzed in Chapter 1.

I have entitled this section “affect” to highlight the way talent is portrayed as a type of interpersonal intensity—as provoking moments of experience which motivate action in an embodied way.¹³⁴ It is important to note, however, that discourses on these shows often conflate affect—to offer another definition, those “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing”—with feelings and emotions.¹³⁵ In other words, when Mariah Carey confessed that she *felt* every word, and Nikki Minaj denied *feeling* “that thing,” these judges may partially be describing a feeling (to employ Eric Shouse’s characterization, “a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labelled”), but they are also pointing to something that “can’t even be put in words.”¹³⁶ The notion of affect also emphasizes the relationship between talent and embodiment on these shows. As the vignette of Chris Weaver earlier in the chapter evinces, talent is paradoxically portrayed as transcending a performer’s body (judges on *The Voice* are ostensibly able to identify talent more impartially without the distraction of the body in which it dwells) and as located precisely in embodied experience, as this section will illustrate.¹³⁷

In each of the preceding sections of this chapter, these programs have represented musical talent precisely along these lines: as something that originates in and is determined by visceral forces other than conscious knowing. This section, therefore, does not intend to describe a phenomenon

¹³³ Burnell Taylor audition.

¹³⁴ Silvan S. Tomkins, “The Quest for Primary Motives: Biography and Autobiography of an Idea,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 41 (August 1, 1981): 306–29.

¹³⁵ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

¹³⁶ Burnell Taylor audition.

¹³⁷ This brings up shadows of the previous chapter’s discussion of discourses around Blind Tom: was his talent located in his body, his mind, or his soul?

separate from the construction of anti-talent and the portrayal of talent as inextricable with adverse experience, but rather to consider the affective representation of talent from another vantage point. Although Carey's tears, Urban's laughter, and Randy's exclamations of pleasure in response to Taylor's singing are not themselves ideologically focused, they serve to fortify the naturalizing ideologies of talent, giftedness, and potential built into the premise and structure of these programs.¹³⁸ As Simon Cowell remarked to Calysta Bevier after her *AGT* audition, also remarking that the intensity he felt was impossible to explain, "You know what, I just had this *feeling* when you walked out. I can't explain it. Just your spirit, the choice of song, your voice. I think you're really special. I've just got this really incredible feeling about you."¹³⁹ Or, as one judge noted in the first episode of *The Voice*'s inaugural season, discussing the program's novel, seemingly more objective blind audition format, "I won't know until I *feel* it."¹⁴⁰

Anti-talented contestants are also received through an affective lens. Judges perform reactions of disgust, discomfort, or unfavorable amusement in response to undeniably musically unskilled contestants like William Hung or Nick Zitzmann. More informative, however, are the occasional anti-talent auditions in which contestants exhibit essentially all of the acknowledged signifiers of exceptional musical ability, but fail to rouse the judges physically and emotionally. In a 2018 *American Idol* audition, for example, contestant Brittany Holmes sang the technically challenging Mariah Carey song, "I Have Nothing," receiving an unenthusiastic response from the judges despite her evident training and experience.¹⁴¹ Perry remarked, "It sounds pretty good, I just didn't feel anything" and, later, "I want to connect. I really want to feel. I don't want to just listen...How am I going to get those chill bumps, you know?" In a similar distinction between musical sound and

¹³⁸ As Brian Massumi has argued, "affect holds the key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology." Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique*, no. 31 (1995): 104.

¹³⁹ Russell Norman, "Episode 1104," *America's Got Talent* (NBC Television, June 21, 2016).

¹⁴⁰ Alan Carter, "Season 1, Episode 1," *The Voice* (NBC Television, April 26, 2011).

¹⁴¹ Russell Norman, "Nashville Auditions," *American Idol*, (ABC, March 26, 2018).

affective response in listeners, Richie commented, “I’m not critiquing the voice, I’m critiquing the delivery.” In other words, it was not Holmes’ musical “chops” that Richie saw as deficient, but something else, something that hinged on the music’s transmission. Following Holmes’ audition, Richie explained further that learned technical skill is necessary but not sufficient within the judges’ conception of talent: “we have a huge responsibility to find true talent, real talent. I want these people to come out and blow my socks off the first time I hear their voice.” According to this definition, talent is always already present, and the educational process (and competition) that ensues merely refines, or draws out, this originary “true talent, real talent” that judges like Richie sense “the first time [they] hear their voice.”¹⁴²



Figure 3.7: Judges displaying their experiences of frisson.

References to magic arise often in these discourses about the affective affirmation of talent’s presence. As something that can be felt but not described, detected but not scientifically explained, the presence and experience of music-making by contestants with the X-factor of talent is represented as something of a magical spectacle. To Season 16 *American Idol* contestant Genavieve Linkowski, for example, Bryan exclaims, “You just had *magic* in your voice. I don’t know how to describe it. You’ve just got magic in it.” Magical language like this not only summons the previous

¹⁴² Russell Norman, “Nashville Auditions,” *American Idol*, (ABC, March 26, 2018).

chapter's discussion of the intersections between discourses of musical talent and magical powers; they also represent the judges' inability to explain the presence of talent's effects otherwise.¹⁴³

As evidence of affective response is often subtle, these programs visualize the impacts of talented performers on judges and live audience members in order to cultivate like responses in television viewers. Judges discuss their emotional and physical reactions to the contestant's voice far more frequently than the musical features of a successful or unsuccessful audition. For example, Figure 3.7 illustrates Katy Perry and Luke Bryan comparing their goosebumps toward the end of a contestant's audition as a test of their musical potential. This physical response has a number of descriptors—gooseflesh, thrills, chills, shivers—is most widely known as frisson by psychologists (psychopsysiologists Gunther Bernatzky and Jack Panksepp have descriptively referred to the experience as “skin orgasm” instead, but this term has not gained currency).¹⁴⁴ Researchers have found in the context of music that rather than serving as a shortcut to some universally unanimous truth about the presence of talent, frisson is chiefly connected to relatively loud musical passages and moments in which expectations are somehow disrupted.¹⁴⁵ This second category of frisson-inducing musical experience is responsible for a significant number of positive portrayals of talent on all three shows. This includes, for instance, violations of expectations around racialized vocal styles and genre choice, like African American contestants on *AGT* Landeau Eugene Murphy (Season 6) and Travis Pratt (Season 8) performing selections from Frank Sinatra and Puccini, respectively; Children with unexpectedly powerful or mature voices (Anna Graceman or Bianca Ryan on *AGT*); and contestants who are not conventionally beautiful but perform beautifully

¹⁴³ For a much more extensive analysis of the role of magic in musical discourse, see Loeffler, “Speaking of Magic.” As Loeffler notes, understandings of magic like Bryan's function as a container that preserves “a utopian drive toward collectivity.”

¹⁴⁴ David Brian Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (MIT Press, 2006); Colver and El-Alayli, “Getting Aesthetic Chills from Music”; John A. Sloboda, “Music Structure and Emotional Response: Some Empirical Findings,” *Psychology of Music* 19, no. 2 (October 1, 1991): 110–20.

¹⁴⁵ Huron, *Sweet Anticipation*, 34.

(Jordan Smith on *The Voice*, Frenchie Davis on *American Idol*—which caused Paula Abdul’s frisson reaction shown in Figure 3.7). Moreover, as Pereira et al. have found, it is not only a musician’s delivery of a song but the song itself—specifically, a listener’s level of familiarity—that often induces frisson and other positive responses.¹⁴⁶

The affective experience of talent is also frequently portrayed as analogous to romantic love or sexual attraction, which are notoriously characterized as universally experienced, innately sensed, and difficult to control.¹⁴⁷ As *The Voice*’s double-entendre “I want you” signs in Figure 3.3 suggest, elements of emotional and physical desire to become associated with the contestants’ voices (or perhaps the contestants themselves) drive their decision to turn their chairs. The coaching, or courtship, process between judges and contestants on each show frequently portrays the initial recognition of musical talent as analogous to love at first sight, with judges’ performed reactions to singers blurring the line between star-struck and love-struck (Figure 3.8).



Figure 3.8: Blurred boundaries between recognizing musical talent and experiencing love or attraction.

¹⁴⁶ “Familiarity seems to be a crucial factor in making the listeners emotionally engaged with music, as revealed by fMRI data.” Carlos Silva Pereira et al., “Music and Emotions in the Brain: Familiarity Matters,” *PLOS ONE* 6, no. 11 (November 16, 2011).

¹⁴⁷ The manufacturing of talent as love extends to the audience. As Ouellette notes in the context of *American Idol*, “*AI* wants its fans to feel love, or more specifically, the ‘love marks.’ Audience participation is a way of getting *AI* viewers more deeply invested, shoring up their loyalty to the franchise and its sponsors.” Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*.

For example, after contestant Hannah Eyre's successful blind audition, judge Gwen Stefani implored, "I want to find a girl who is sparkly, and talented, and young," continuing, almost in the style of a dating show, "I can share everything I've done with you and we can have so much fun together."¹⁴⁸ When Levine and Shelton subsequently try to win Eyre over with comments like, "You have talent and you have this charisma and every time you smile, the whole room lights up," Stefani responds to their flirtatious attempts by insisting, "He's really cute, and he's really cute, but they're both taken." In another episode, judge Alisha Keys proclaimed to contestant Lauren Diaz, "There's no denying this God-given talent that you have. And I just know that you and me are meant to be together."¹⁴⁹ To Season 1 winner Javier Colon, judge Christina Aguilera extended the metaphor to the realm of the more explicitly sexual: "I wanted to get lost in you, I wanted to really feel you."¹⁵⁰ In being likened to love, the experience of witnessing musical talent takes on an additional layer of magic or inexplicability, and involves a disavowal of agency that credits fate and common-sense, summoning the truism of "you know it when you see/feel it" (used to explain love, but also pornography, to recall the discussion of Justice Stewart earlier in the chapter). Further, appeals to experiences of "talent at first sight" de-emphasize the educational processes that preceded the moment of performance, and even the specific musical achievements that elicited such a reaction.

In representing talent's presence as something substantiated by judges' affective responses, these programs introduce the sort of ambiguity essential to musical talent's power as a floating signifier. Affective impact is difficult to normalize and easy to naturalize; said differently, judges who experience the presence of "talent" need not cite evidence beyond their own ostensibly indescribable affective knowledge. And even if there were some means of measuring the affective impact of a musical performance (something psychologists and neuroscientists have pursued but certainly not

¹⁴⁸ Alan Carter, "Season 12, Episode 6," *The Voice* (NBC Television, March 13, 2017).

¹⁴⁹ Alan Carter, "Season 11, Episode 2," *The Voice* (NBC Television, September 20, 2016).

¹⁵⁰ Alan Carter, "Season 1, Episode 1," *The Voice* (NBC Television, April 26, 2011).

achieved), each listener is inevitably affected differently, rendering pronouncements of talent unapologetically reflective of the tastes and whims of those with the power to make such pronouncements.

Conclusion

During what has been described as a post-truth era, when challenges to research- and evidence-driven narratives are, as Lee McIntyre has noted, “so openly embraced as a strategy for the political subordination of reality,” reality television’s widely enjoyed representations of educationally consequential ideas like innate musical talent and meritocracy call all the more urgently for critical examination.¹⁵¹ Research into individual differences and musical ability development has helped answer questions about the relationship between heredity and environment and rejected Jeffersonian constructions of innate, discoverable talent in favor of more nuanced models and theories—from Carol Dweck’s mindset research, to Csikszentmihalyi’s culturally relativist view of creativity, to McMahan’s assertion that genius is a historically specific construct. This scholarly discourse, however, is not categorically heeded, but competes for prominence against pervasive and affectively potent popular discourses of talent like those discussed in this chapter.¹⁵² While I do *not* argue here (or in the dissertation more broadly) that “science” is able to reveal some objective “truth” of talent being obscured by television programs like *American Idol*—that definitive answers about the meaning of musical talent can be determined through brain scans or comprehensive surveys—I have demonstrated how the judges and producers of these programs perpetuate a particularly oversimplified and unrealistic Jeffersonian myth that obscures the ways musicians develop their abilities and achieve success in the music industry and elsewhere. The discourse systems of reality

¹⁵¹ Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (MIT Press, 2018), 2. As McIntyre points out, this conception has been so pervasive that “post-truth” was chosen as the Oxford Dictionaries’ 2016 word of the year.

¹⁵² Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Random House Publishing Group, 2006); Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, “Culture, Time, and the Development of Talent”; McMahan, *Divine Fury*.

television, academic scholarship, and American educational politics do not exist in mutually exclusive realms, but rather converge, mingle, fuse, and ultimately compete for dominance in the day-to-day consciousness of Americans who traverse such discourses.¹⁵³

Philip V. Bohlman has called the Eurovision song contest “a site of power, pleasure, and prayer” which “also becomes the site of politics, utopian and dystopian.”¹⁵⁴ It is easy to see the diverse assembly of publics that constitute American talent shows as analogous. Kingsbury has pointed out that musical talent is a cultural symbol which “constitutes a transformational link between the ‘political’ and the ‘musical.’”¹⁵⁵ And indeed, through watching these talent competition shows, viewers can glimpse utopian fantasies of functional meritocracies and educational gatekeeping systems that allow every individual to succeed at their own unique talent. Through further analysis, however, they will also see the ways that utopian fantasies of innate, adversity-defying talent are a highly manipulative product of the reality television and music industries. While this chapter has examined how all ten meanings of talent analyzed in Chapter 1 have entered into discursive struggle on these programs, I am not suggesting that these representations are direct reflections of talent’s meanings and uses in wider American contexts. As the following chapter will illustrate, talent takes on significantly different meanings and social functions that are less driven by material interests and ideologies when we look at music classrooms instead of television sets. In other words, while not all understandings of talent represent such an extreme instance of what Marx has discussed as false consciousness, the understandings perpetuated by reality television programs certainly do.

¹⁵³ As Foucault has noted, discourse “is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but it is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized.” Michel Foucault, “Orders of Discourse,” *Social Science Information* 10, no. 2 (April 1, 1971): 7–30.

¹⁵⁴ Philip V. Bohlman, “The Politics of Power, Pleasure and Prayer in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Muzikologija*, no. 7 (2007): 39–67.

¹⁵⁵ Kingsbury, *Music Talent & Performance*, 79.

I admit I did not start out as an avid fan of these programs prior to undertaking this project. After watching many hours of auditions, however, I too occasionally experienced frisson, lumps in my throat, and inspirational feelings about the possibilities of music. But these jolts of feeling and affect do not only inspire; they also obscure and distract. Viewers are encouraged to forget that for every dancing and smiling super-crip, for every deaf vocalist with a pitch-perfect voice, for every musically “gifted” cancer survivor, are the vast majority of others who have experienced the less glamorous quotidian realities of impairment, adversity, and the repetitive, uninspiring process of skill development.¹⁵⁶ The concept of talent can indeed provide restitutive promises of what could be: narratives of strength and optimism in the face of hopelessness, beauty in the face of suffering, social mobility in the face of financial hardship.¹⁵⁷ But there are problems with embracing this “inspiration porn” without scrutinizing the processes that lurk behind, before, and around that moment of enchantment or awe. It is important to understand the costs of believing, “buying into,” these promises—of “binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer,” to summon Lauren Berlant’s figuration.¹⁵⁸ In other words, the conception of musical talent that viewers are prompted to take away from these programs is exactly the conception that hinders their own musical achievements.¹⁵⁹ Further, the restitutive fantasies of Jeffersonian talent do not disadvantage all

¹⁵⁶ As William Cheng has noted on the cost of such fantasies for discourses of disability in particular, “Highlighting certain talents as miracle correctives additionally risks implying that disabled people who do not display obvious, marketable talents are somehow more hopelessly disabled and less deserving of attention and compassion. As reality shows raise up singing ability as facile proof of pseudo-normalcy, this emphasis on the lyric voice consistently threatens to bring disability under erasure, obscuring the practical, political, and lived realities of bodily difference and oppression.” Cheng, “Staging Overcoming,” 205.

¹⁵⁷ These shows also provide platforms for figures whose “talents” and messages perpetuate empowering narratives largely separate from this production of false consciousness. For instance, see Farzaneh Hemmasi, “‘One Can Veil and Be a Singer!’: Performing Piety on an Iranian Talent Competition,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 13, no. 3 (November 18, 2017): 416–37.

¹⁵⁸ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 51.

¹⁵⁹ To put this idea in Dweck’s terms, as one example of how this functions psychologically, these programs perpetuate a fixed mindset that reifies understandings of talent as a stable and innate trait, while it has been found that a growth mindset, the recognition that talents are developed rather than discovered (or not), contributes most significantly to the achievement of expertise. Dweck, *Mindset*.

groups equally. It is no coincidence, for example, that the last 9 of 10 *American Idol* winners were white, and all but one of those winners were white men.¹⁶⁰

While I discussed the purported parallels between televised talent competition programs and American educational discourses at the start of the chapter, it is worth returning to the question of this discursive imbrication to emphasize the ways that these programs do indeed resemble the education system—but not in the idealized ways that Lisa Natchurian and others have proposed.¹⁶¹ Rather, these two discourse systems are similar in their *purporting* of meritocratic processes and their execution of judgments and gatekeeping and tracking practices that *claim* to reward contestants for talent, giftedness, and potential. Upon further scrutiny, however, it becomes clear that these systems reward an entirely different set of skills, skills about which contestants and students may not even be consciously aware. These institutional facilitations of misrecognition reward contestants and students who have already benefitted from forms of capital that allowed them acquire the musical and non-musical skills that are identified later on as evidence of “potential.” Such a process is not all that different from the sorting and gatekeeping systems based on high-stakes testing in schools or evaluations in any number of other educational contexts. As the following chapter discusses in further detail, ideologies of talent not only impact the evaluation and gatekeeping around musical abilities, but the very formation of those abilities, beginning with the very first moments of children’s musical experiences.

¹⁶⁰ This inequality goes beyond mere representation, perpetuating the same myths of racial inferiority that have accompanied gifted and talented programs for over a century. As one fan joked in an online forum, “you’ll notice that [*American Idol*] is like a horror movie. The minorities vanish first.” American Idol IMDB page. Adrian val Olonan, ““American Idol” Was Good, Until It Became American Idle,” July 19, 2015. Keith Boykin further observed, “because of our different levels of exposure, Blacks are more likely to recognize white talent than whites are to recognize Black talent.” “Commentary: Why America Eliminated the Two Black Singers on The Voice,” BET.com, accessed April 28, 2018, <https://www.bet.com/news/national/2014/05/07/commentary-why-america-eliminated-the-two-black-singers-on-the-voice.html?cid=facebook>.

¹⁶¹ Natchurian, “If Only Our Education System Was Run like American Idol.”

IV.

Teaching Talent: The Pedagogies of Shinichi Suzuki and Mark O'Connor



Figure 4.1: PhoenixPhest Suzuki Institute (Eastern Michigan University). Photo by author, July 2014.

Introduction

Over one hundred students stand on a concert hall stage, arranged by height. Each one holds a violin adorned with some combination of sponges, rubber bands, and stickers. Although the smallest violinists in the front look barely old enough to be out of diapers, they hold their instruments with a nonchalant facility as though they were any other quotidian objects. Two adults at the front of the stage address the wiggling legion and coax their scattered attention toward the accompanist beginning to play “Mississippi Hot Dog” (four sixteenth notes and two eighth notes, also known as “Pepperoni Pizza” and “Peanut Butter Jelly,” among other frequently culinary mnemonics), on B_4 and then A_4 . Heeding the pianist’s familiar call, the students simultaneously raise their bows and launch into the rhythmically reinvented melody of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” in perfect unison. I glance over at the parents in the audience, who have likely heard this song

thousands of times (in lessons, home practice, and on the recording every student is expected to listen to once a day), gazing out at the packed stage with pleasure and pride. While this particular performance occurred on a Thursday afternoon during the 2014 meeting of the PhoenixPhest Suzuki Institute near Ann Arbor, Michigan, nearly identical spectacles could have been glimpsed at institutes across the United States that summer, and every summer and school year since the 1970s.

An online video confidently entitled “Best ‘Boil ‘Em Cabbage Down’ ever!” starts mid-set at the 2010 jazz festival in Marciac, France, with Trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and violinist Mark O’Connor sweating under the lights of the festival’s main stage.¹ Marsalis announces that their next number is one of the earliest African American fiddle tunes and, coincidentally, the first song O’Connor learned as a student. Without leaving a second of silence, the fiddler launches unaccompanied into an energetic Nashville shuffle rhythm on his two upper strings and transitions into a relatively unadorned version of the four-note melody of “Boil ‘Em Cabbage Down.”² The six-piece band enters soon thereafter to accompany O’Connor’s increasingly virtuosic improvisations on the tune, occasionally shaking their heads in performative admiration of a few of O’Connor’s musical ideas. By the time Marsalis enters with his solo, O’Connor has soared through no fewer than 28 repetitions of the tune, from secondary melodies spanning the range of his instrument, to bluegrass-style double stop strokes, to jazz-influenced figures decorated with glissandos and blue notes.³ The camera cuts to the audience. They are on their feet, without perceptible exception, cheering and clapping.

¹ Mark O’Connor, *Best “Boil ‘em Cabbage Down” Ever! - Mark O’Connor/Wynton Marsalis*, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyt646v4hxA>.

² The Nashville Shuffle most conspicuously involves a long-short-short bowing pattern.

³ While some versions of the song (often those with a vocalist) play it with a verse-chorus structure, the A and B sections have the same chord progression (I-IV-I-V; I-VI-I-V-I) and are indistinguishable in improvised instrumental versions like this one by O’Connor and Marsalis.

Deeply divergent understandings of musical ability development circumscribe these two scenes.⁴ Such divergences are not merely a matter of perspective or passive explanation. Rather, they actively shape the musical worlds of young people—from their ambitions and enthusiasms and personalities to the ways they conceptualize learning processes and establish their identities. This final case study focuses not on the perceptions of journalists or judges or fans, but on the ways historically specific ideologies of talent operate upon and within pedagogical discourses themselves. I focus upon two teaching “methods” practiced by American music educators: one developed by Japanese pedagogue Shinichi Suzuki (1898–1998), and one promoted more recently by the American violinist Mark O’Connor (1961–).⁵ Each method involves a set of philosophical and practical approaches to musical instruction built upon a sequenced repertoire of pieces; the vignettes above describe performances of the first song introduced in each method book. In addition to providing quintessential examples of each method’s first songs as Suzuki and O’Connor hoped for them to be performed, these two scenes offer a metonymical glimpse into their respective conceptions about ability development.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how these two teaching methods promote radically different ideologies of musical talent—and, by extension, music itself. In addition to affecting students’ educational outcomes, I contend that these differing approaches to learning demonstrate the multiple ways that beliefs in natural ability mediate the development and maintenance of social and cultural capital. Where Suzuki argued that “talent is no accident of birth” and that all children are capable of being intentionally and lovingly shaped into talented learners and musicians through his method, O’Connor upholds a conception of talent closer to the Jeffersonian paradigm discussed in

⁴ Both of these vignettes were taken from my ethnographic fieldwork: the first (along with Figure 4.1) describes a scene I encountered as a participant observer at the PhoenixPhest summer institute in 2014, and the second describes a video that was shown to my teacher training class at the O’Connor Method summer camp in August of 2015.

⁵ I discuss my interlocutors’ highly contentious, divergent understandings of the term “method” on page 201.

the previous chapter. O'Connor has noted that some students will possess more musical potential than others (often using himself as an example), and that his method books' repertoire is designed to serve the needs of a diverse range of student "talents" and interests.⁶ While the pedagogical ideologies and musical repertoires described by Suzuki and O'Connor permeate the chapter, in the latter half I focus further on two teachers who enact and build upon these ideologies in their day-to-day teaching. Both of these master teachers have contributed significantly to the methods as they were initially conceived—in terms of the pedagogical techniques they employ and the philosophical principles they promote, and also in terms of their promotion of the method on a national scale as institute organizers, teacher trainers, and published authors. Said differently, the methods of Suzuki and O'Connor serve as a motivation and guide for each teacher, but these two women are much more than passive instruments of Suzuki's and O'Connor's visions.⁷

In the Suzuki realm, I have conducted the majority of my fieldwork with the Northern Virginia Suzuki Music School, primarily the studio of Ronda Cole, a teacher who has been developing her highly researched and rigorous application of the Suzuki approach since the 1960s. Within the more nascent O'Connor Method community, I have observed the teaching of Pamela Wiley, a former Suzuki teacher (a common attribute of O'Connor method teachers) based in Charleston, South Carolina.⁸ Wiley worked closely with O'Connor to develop the method books, the

⁶ As he commented in a teacher training class in 2015, discussing how different students will have moments where their unique talent is stimulated by his method's repertoire, "We don't know what the light bulb moment will be for your students; we've gotta keep them in. Um, it could easily have been a different style of violin playing for [Forrest, O'Connor's son], or writing his own music on violin, it could have been anything." August 15, 2015.

⁷ It is worth noting the gendered aspect of the various roles in this chapter—a subject that merits further discussion elsewhere, not least because some might incorrectly assume that these two female teachers are relatively uncreative executors or "performers" of the "works" of each male method founder. Indeed, these roles are symptomatic of larger dynamics within the educational world. Suzuki and O'Connor both enjoyed the immense privilege of support networks populated by women that provided them the opportunity (in various ways) to develop and promote their methods; and their ideas have subsequently been magnified by populations of teachers comprised mostly of women. The proliferation of white women teachers (in violin teaching and elsewhere) has been discussed in a variety of forums. For just one helpful analysis of the role of gender and power in educational contexts, see Susan Laine Gabriel and Isaiah Smithson, *Gender in the Classroom: Power and Pedagogy* (University of Illinois Press, 1990).

⁸ At the time of this writing, Cole's studio is populated mostly by upper- and upper-middle class white and east Asian families; Wiley's studio serves a much more diverse range of families: students living in rural areas outside Charleston as

first of which was released in 2009. Unlike Suzuki, who passed away in 1998, Mark O'Connor is frequently present at the institutes and workshops promoting his method, but has not dedicated time to teaching students or studying music education, instead pursuing a career as a performer and composer. And so, while I have spoken with O'Connor about his method and taken teacher training courses with him, my analysis focuses on the ways the method is interpreted and practiced by Pamela Wiley, an experienced teacher with an active studio.

Even within the realm of string instrument instruction, the Suzuki and O'Connor methods exist among countless others available to contemporary American music teachers. I focus on these methods because they represent two relatively distinct and distant nodes within a much larger constellation of approaches I have witnessed as a researcher and educator.⁹ Much more often, music teachers—in private lessons, public schools, and elsewhere—incline toward idiosyncratic combinations of method book materials, understandings of talent and exceptionalism, and teaching techniques that have been influenced by the highly visible and accessible as well as the more traditionally “American” ideologies that Mark O'Connor claims to have curated and characterized in his method.¹⁰

well as urban and suburban neighborhoods; a variety of racial and ethnic groups, and families in a range of socioeconomic groups—from those who live in a local mobile home community to a family that owns a multi-million dollar plantation in the Charleston area.

⁹ Pam Wiley, one of the co-founders of the O'Connor Method whom I discuss in detail later in the chapter, has referred to this constellation, which includes both O'Connor and Suzuki method practitioners as well as every other music teaching approach used around the United States, as the American Music System. Rather than painting the Suzuki and O'Connor methods as oppositional or antithetical—a tempting way to frame their relationship based on some of the recent rhetoric about them—I ascribe to Wiley's characterization, which emphasizes the many points of connection and commonality that have shaped the communities that practice them.

¹⁰ Although both methods have been adapted to a variety of instruments, I focus here on the violin, the primary instrument of both Suzuki and O'Connor and the one most commonly associated with each method. The violin is also particularly instructive for this project: it is both widely practiced and notoriously difficult to master, qualities that bring questions of talent and ability development to the fore. Musicians who find success as violinists confront a wide range of explanations for their abilities that relate to the typology of talent in manifold ways, not least in their frequent designation as prodigies or geniuses. The violin is also a historically multifaceted instrument with ties to a variety of genres and cultural traditions—a quality important both to Suzuki and O'Connor, if for different reasons, and for a project that asks questions about understandings of musicality, which often vary among musical traditions, genres, and cultures.

While I begin by discussing Suzuki's and O'Connor's interventions from a historical and critical perspective, I am also interested in the ways their ideas have been interpreted and lived—in each method's collective pedagogical *praxis*, to summon Paulo Freire's understanding of the term as a never-ending cycle of critical reflection and action.¹¹ The chapter's ethnographic data, therefore, are drawn from research I have conducted with Suzuki and O'Connor teachers and families over the span of six years, including semi-structured interviews, audio and video footage, and *in situ* notes from my experiences as a participant-observer.¹² I have attended (either as a teacher trainee, teacher, or observer) at least ten Suzuki institutes during this time, and have observed lessons taught by over twenty Suzuki teachers around the country in various contexts. I have also attended three O'Connor summer camps and observed around fifteen teachers who use the method books. This discrepancy in the distribution of fieldwork is a sign of a broader disproportionality: while there have been hundreds (if not thousands) of Suzuki institutes since they were instituted in the 1970s, O'Connor only began offering his official method-based camps in 2011, which have been held sporadically in a handful of locations since then.¹³ As the ethnographic aspects of the chapter are based on data from individual studios, I do not aim to compare the outcomes of these methods on a larger, national scale. I hope, however, to provide an illuminating case study—a thick description of the ways these methods and their treatments of talent operate in these two emblematic cases.¹⁴ Further, the analysis

¹¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Herder and Herder, 1970).

¹² During these years, my fieldwork often occurred during week-long periods of time, both for summer camps and institutes, and when I shadowed teachers to observe all of the lessons and classes in each teacher's regular weekly teaching schedules. In addition to 2-5 weeks of this type of fieldwork each year, I regularly observed teaching within my Chicago community. I have also been immersed in both methods through my work as a teacher, youth orchestra conductor, and the director of a small music school in Chicago.

¹³ Further, there has been debate within the broader O'Connor method community about what constitutes an O'Connor camp, further reducing the number of camps that can be observed and compared as such. After a few summer institutes and camps held by other teachers (such as Pamela Wiley) incorporated repertoire beyond the solo and orchestral pieces included in the O'Connor method books, O'Connor disallowed those events from officially being called "O'Connor Method" camps and did not promote them in his method's marketing materials or financial umbrella.

¹⁴ While thick description has been interpreted in a number of ways, I mean to describe something akin to what Sherry B. Ortner has discussed in Sherry B. Ortner, "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (January 1995): 173–93.

of individual lessons in the final section of this chapter offers a musicological rendering of what Frederick Erickson described as a “natural history approach to studying taught cognitive learning.”¹⁵ In that section, I zoom in on one private violin lesson taught according to each method, conducting deductive analysis of the video and audio footage. I have aimed not only to ascertain what students did and did not learn, but also *how* they learned it—what Erickson has called a “process report”—and, ultimately, to demonstrate what this teaching and learning process can reveal about the roles and impacts of each method’s distinct conception of talent.¹⁶

I have referred to the pedagogical interventions of Suzuki and O’Connor as “methods,” but this is a word fraught with ambiguity and controversy in pedagogical circles—especially the two examined in this chapter. In general teaching contexts, a method is understood as “a set of principles, procedures or strategies to be implemented by teachers to achieve desired learning in students” that vary according to teachers’ treatment of the subject matter and their beliefs about how students learn.¹⁷ Within the musical realm, methods are sometimes understood as synonymous with method *books*—musical textbooks that designate a specific sequence of pieces and exercises.¹⁸ In other contexts, however, music teaching methods are defined more holistically—as in the case of the Kodály or Dalcrose methods—and are intended to include a set of pedagogical philosophies, objectives, and teaching techniques alongside the musical curriculum. Unsurprisingly, Suzuki and O’Connor conceptualized their “methods” in meaningfully different ways: for Suzuki, the pieces served as a conduit for a specific and holistic *approach* to teaching children, and so the books were merely one small aspect of the overall approach he developed; for O’Connor, the “method” is

¹⁵ Frederick Erickson, “Taught Cognitive Learning in Its Immediate Environments: A Neglected Topic in the Anthropology of Education,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1982): 149–80. 140 and 161, respectively.

¹⁶ Erickson.

¹⁷ Peter S. Westwood, *What Teachers Need to Know about Teaching Methods* (Australian Council for Education Research, 2008).

¹⁸ In the case of violin, common method books include *Strictly Strings*, *Essential Elements*, *All for Strings*, *A Tune a Day*, and *The String Builder*, for instance.

precisely the sequence of songs and arrangements contained in the books.¹⁹ Indeed, to stave off misunderstandings that her teaching practice focuses solely on the repertoire in the Suzuki method books (a frequent practice of string teachers without Suzuki training who call themselves “Suzuki teachers”), Ronda Cole insists upon calling Suzuki’s pedagogical contribution an “approach” rather than a method.²⁰ While acknowledging Cole’s intervention, I refer in this chapter to both Suzuki’s and O’Connor’s pedagogical interventions—the content of their method books as well as the “methods” teachers employ to teach that repertoire—as methods, for terminological ease and comparative reasons.

Although music teachers often discuss methods as neutral or uncomplicated guides for building techniques—certain songs are taught in certain orders to varying degrees of success—the process of teaching music according to one method or another has political dimensions.²¹ From a discourse analytical perspective, a teaching method might be described as a way of inculcating students into a particular ideological-discursive formation that reproduces the social norms and values of the method’s architect.²² Or from a musicological perspective, one could describe a method as one particular way of defining and presenting the concept of music and the goals of music making for (new) students. Here, I examine the pedagogical priorities teachers trained in each method are expected to convey as well as the divergences that emerge in the cultural and historical context in which the method is being applied.²³ In the context of this project, then, a method not

¹⁹ As the O’Connor Method website states, “The O’Connor Method for string teachers and students is a 10-Book series.” “About the O’Connor Method,” accessed July 26, 2018, <http://www.oconnormethod.com/About-Us.html>.

²⁰ Perhaps the most rigorous theoretical discussion about methods has taken place in the literature on teaching English as a second language. For a discussion of the difference between method, approach, and technique, see Mark A. Clarke, “The Scope of Approach, the Importance of Method, and the Nature of Technique,” *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics*, 1983, 106–15.

²¹ As Mark A. Clarke put it, “Method is the profession’s counterpart of an Escher painting.” See “The Scope of Approach, the Importance of Method, and the Nature of Technique,” *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics*, 1983, 106–15.

²² Norman L. Fairclough, “Critical and Descriptive Goals in Discourse Analysis,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 9, no. 6 (December 1, 1985): 739–63.

²³ In other words, Suzuki’s understanding of music, music-making, practice, parenting, and many other related fundamentals of his method originated in the context of early 20th century Japan. Regardless of whether contemporary

only provides students with a specific repertoire to play, but actively forms their understanding of music's place in society and its role in their personal lives; it privileges certain musical skills over others; and it advocates particular conceptions of what it means to be creative, musical, and musically talented.

Though it may seem like the differences between these methods sketch out the contours of the familiar nature-nurture debate, neither of these communities subscribes to one side of this false dichotomy: the Suzuki parents, students, and teachers with whom I spoke readily acknowledge the existence of biologically derivative individual differences between students, and members of the O'Connor community recognize the necessity of repetitive practice and the teacher's central role in the realization of students' musical potentials. As Wiley commented, for example, "if you have a good teacher, that's a leg up. If you have a pretty good instrument, that's a leg up. If you've got some natural talent or you're smart and take instructions well, [...] then, you know, you've got an advantage. But there's nothing that substitutes for time on the instrument."²⁴ The multifaceted ways practitioners of each method conceive and *respond* to differences between students, however, reveals the complex mechanisms through which ideologies of talent are mobilized in the process of teaching and learning.²⁵

This chapter's trajectory moves from general to specific—from intentions to realizations in specific educational encounters. First, from a more music-historical perspective, I consider writings

American teachers are replicating his original vision, their interpretation of his goals and ideas has produced a new and different approach to teaching and learning in comparison to other traditionally American methods in circulation.

²⁴ Transcript of lesson taught on April 20, 2018.

²⁵ Patricia S. Campbell once described her work in the ethnomusicology of music education as occupying "the cracks between education and musicology"; I see my musicological interrogation of talent in this chapter in a similar light—though I also aim to suggest ways to fill the disciplinary cracks that Campbell described. The chapter's goals, therefore, are multi-pronged: to contribute to the growing but still insufficient musicological literature on music education; to demonstrate music's possibilities as a rich and multifaceted window into larger themes in the study of teaching and learning; and, not least, to offer practicing music educators like me an opportunity to critically reflect upon their own views. Patricia S. Campbell, "Ethnomusicology and Music Education: Crossroads for Knowing Music, Education, and Culture," *Research Studies in Music Education* 21, no. 1 (December 1, 2003): 17.

by and about the founders of these two methods to evaluate the historical conditions and contingencies of their inception. Second, I discuss the ways Ronda Cole and Pamela Wiley have adopted and adapted these methods in their studios. Third, I closely analyze the events two lessons in particular, one taught by Cole and one taught by Wiley, in order to consider how these ideologies present themselves in actual pedagogical encounters.

Shinichi Suzuki

Talent is no accident of birth. In today's society a good many people seem to have the idea that if one is born without talent, there is nothing he can do about it; they simply resign themselves to what they consider to be their "fate." Consequently they go through life without living it to the full or ever knowing life's true joy. That is a man's greatest tragedy.²⁶

So begins the text of *Nurtured by Love*, a collection of reflections and stories by Shinichi Suzuki that is assigned to teachers and parents across the United States as an introduction to the teaching method Suzuki himself called *Saino Kyoiku*, or "Talent Education." At the heart of Suzuki's mission in establishing a new pedagogical approach was an alternative understanding and treatment of talent as a concept. Suzuki opposed beliefs—prominent both in Japan and the West during his lifetime—that children were born with innate aptitudes for music or any other specialized skill. To offer one example, in Leopold Auer's method book written around the time Suzuki started playing the violin himself, the famous performer and teacher discouraged students without the requisite natural gifts from pursuing the instrument: "One great mistake lies in the failure of so large a majority of those who decide to devote themselves to music—to learning some string instrument, the violin, for example—to ascertain at the very outset whether nature has adequately supplied them with the necessary tools for what they have in mind."²⁷ Instead, Suzuki argued that, just as all children acquire the ability to comprehend and express themselves in their mother tongue through

²⁶ Suzuki and Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*.

²⁷ Leopold Auer, *Violin Playing as I Teach It* (Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1921).

early and consistent participation in the language, children are able to acquire the same type of fluency with music—to acquire talent, as he defined it. As Suzuki explained in *Nurtured by Love* and many other forums throughout his life, these beliefs were influenced by his musical and linguistic experiences in Japan and Germany, by his upbringing in (and later, formal study of) Zen Buddhism, and by a range of Western literary and philosophical works—most significantly those by Leo Tolstoy.²⁸

Unlike most Japanese children of his generation, Shinichi Suzuki grew up surrounded by violins. But unlike most children who grow up surrounded by violins, he did not learn to play the instrument until his adulthood. Shinichi's father, Masakichi, was the son of a prominent *samurai* and trained to continue his family's tradition of making Japanese *samisen* and *koto* stringed instruments. Largely in response to the growing emphasis on European music and culture during the Westernization push of the Meiji period in Japan, Masakichi Suzuki turned his attention to the violin instead, and eventually became the first manufacturer to develop a factory method for producing the instrument.²⁹ After Shinichi Suzuki's graduation from the Nagoya Commercial School in 1916, he was expected to work full-time in the factory. However, a series of circumstances—perhaps beginning with the acquisition of his first record, Mischa Elman playing Schubert's *Ave Maria* and continuing with a bout of bad health that prompted his travel away from home—rerouted his early adult life.³⁰ Instead of devoting his time to the international distribution of Suzuki Violins (and, by the 1920s, an assortment of other instruments) like his two older brothers, Shinichi began his autodidactic journey to become a violinist around age 20: “To think the violin, which I had considered a toy, could produce such beauty of tone! Elman's ‘Ave Maria’ opened my eyes to music. I had no idea why my soul was so moved. But at least I had already developed the ability to

²⁸ Evelyn Hermann, *Shinichi Suzuki: The Man and His Philosophy (Revised)* (Alfred Music, 1999).

²⁹ Margaret Mehl, *Not By Love Alone: The Violin in Japan, 1850-2010* (Sound Book Press, 2014).

³⁰ Mehl.

appreciate this beauty. My profound emotion was the first step in my search for the true meaning of art.”³¹

Suzuki went on to study in Tokyo, which had become a hub for classical music during the Meiji Westernization period of the late nineteenth century, sponsoring European musicians to teach and perform there. At the age of 22, Suzuki traveled to Berlin in pursuit of an even more powerful pedagogical experience, staying eight years in all: “I went to hear everybody, from famous performers to rising young artists, for I wanted to find someone of whom I could truly say, ‘This is the man I want for a teacher.’”³² After months of searching, he decided to pursue famous performer and teacher Karl Klinger, with whom he studied as a private pupil, and became acquainted with an elite circle of performers and other musically educated professionals, including (as Suzuki asserts in his accounts) Albert Einstein.³³ As Suzuki explained in *Nurtured by Love* and in talks recounted to me by teachers who attended them, this musical community deeply shaped his view of the possibilities of playing and experiencing music. He described physically transcendent experiences listening to canonized German composers; he studied composition and orchestration; he courted and married a young German musician, Waltraud Prange, whom he met in Berlin. Margaret Mehl, who has written extensively on the history of Japan and its complex relationship with the West, argues that the Suzuki method “developed in a field that is wholly Western in origin and even regarded as representing one of the supreme achievements of Western civilization.”³⁴

³¹ Suzuki and Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*. It is worth pointing out the amount of financial capital required to allow Shinichi Suzuki to follow this career path.

³² Suzuki and Suzuki, 74.

³³ In his series of attacks on the veracity of Suzuki’s now-mythologized life stories and the legitimacy of his method, O’Connor conducted a series of “investigations” about whether Suzuki actually studied with Klinger and knew Einstein, and to what extent. As the evidence for either side is minimal, the issue is still up for debate. For O’Connor’s accusation, see Mark O’Connor, “KLINGLER Rejects SUZUKI as His Student in 1923,” 2015, <http://markoconnorblog.blogspot.com/2013/09/suzuki-klinger-not-what-you-expected.html>. For an example of the Suzuki Association’s response to O’Connor, see “New York Times Refutes Mark O’Connor’s Accusations Against Suzuki,” *Violinist.com*, <http://www.violinist.com/blog/laurie/201412/16434/>.

³⁴ Margaret Mehl, “Cultural Translation in Two Directions: The Suzuki Method in Japan and Germany,” *Research and Issues in Music Education* 7, no. 1 (September 1, 2009).

Notwithstanding these Western influences, other elements of the Suzuki method were deeply informed by Suzuki's Japanese education and identity. Before traveling to Europe, he became interested in practicing Zen Buddhism beyond the experiences he had as a child, and undertook studies with Fuzan Asano, his mother's uncle and a prominent Zen priest known throughout Japan.³⁵ Indeed, around the time Americans were first adopting the Suzuki method, they were also undergoing their first major exposure to Rinzai and Soto Zen Buddhist practices.³⁶ Robert Fink, who has drawn important connections between the American "discovery" of Zen Buddhism and other concomitant repetitive cultural practices (including the Suzuki method, the Baroque recording boom, and the minimalist music movement) gaining traction at the time, remarked that Suzuki's particular Zen affiliation was unclear.³⁷ Suzuki's aforementioned master, however, was in the Soto school and he often quoted Dogen, a foundational figure in the Soto tradition; Suzuki's pedagogy, too, emphasizes gradual mastery through calm introspection and observation.³⁸ While many basic tenets of the Suzuki method can be connected to Zen philosophy, one of the most notable aspects, especially in the context of Suzuki's (re-)definition of talent, is its particularly Soto-inspired understanding of creativity. While Western ideas of artistic creativity focus on the production of an innovative object, or the expression of the artist's unique voice (evident in the O'Connor method's self-professedly American celebration of this idea of creativity, which emphasizes composition and

³⁵ Hermann, *Shinichi Suzuki*.

³⁶ The former was more prominent in the States and emphasized the active pursuit of enlightenment with absurd questions, koan, at the heart of its pedagogy; the latter was a more meditative practice where the only "goal" per se is fullness of experience. Conrad Hyers, *Once-Born, Twice-Born Zen: The Soto and Rinzai Schools of Japan* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004).

³⁷ Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (University of California Press, 2005).

³⁸ One traditional Japanese saying is particularly evocative of Suzuki's approach, as he constantly used the metaphor of a seed, often rice, being nurtured and cultivated: "Rinzai teaching is like a brave general who moves a regiment without delay, while Soto teaching is like a farmer taking care of a rice field, one stalk after another, patiently." See Hyers, *Once-Born, Twice-Born Zen*.

improvisation), Zen-inspired understandings of creativity often focus on the cultivation of inner experience and character through the process of “creating” art before considering innovation.³⁹

In the context of music, then, the quality of a musician’s sound and proficiency with the instrument serves as evidence that she has cultivated a rich inner relationship with music; technique, though necessary, is never the goal in itself but a symptom of a musician’s mind-body oneness.⁴⁰ This type of mastery is achieved through the traditional Japanese concept of *kata*, literally “form” or “mold,” a pedagogical practice that emphasizes imitative repetition in the interest of achieving an embodied understanding of the artistic form being studied.⁴¹ Through *kata*, a student pursues fulfillment and creativity through rigorous, repetitive imitation of artistic masters in a way that slowly allows the student to embody and occupy the actions of a proficient and respected artist.⁴² As education scholar Koji Matsunobu notes, “The creative goal of *kata*-training is ‘to fuse the individual to the form so that the individual becomes the form and the form becomes the individual.’”⁴³ Suzuki emphasized that the ultimate goal of his method was for children to acquire a noble mind and a beautiful heart through their musical education, not to achieve any particular level of technical proficiency (though, as the example of Ronda Cole’s teaching will illustrate, high levels of technical achievement can also result from this degree of musical immersion and mindful cultivation). While American Suzuki teachers and parents frequently noted in interviews that this aspect of Suzuki’s pedagogy was particularly novel and provocative for them, this idea is more familiar in Japanese

³⁹ Regarding American emphases on the creativity of composition and improvisation, O’Connor wrote a “manifesto” called “A Reemerging American Classical Music” that provides some context into what he sees as his own important intervention. As he writes, “‘Specialization’ became the new paradigm in the classical music industry. Academics, record companies, arts management companies, and impresarios shoved a wedge in between composers and performers. For Europe, it did not matter too much. They already had centuries’ worth of masterworks to boast to the classical music world. We did not. Nevertheless, too many of our composers stopped learning how to perform. And because the ‘American psyche adored heroic individualism,’ performers did not have time to compose: their chief obligation was to dazzle audiences.” O’Connor, “Mark O’Connor Manifesto: A Reemerging American Classical Music.”

⁴⁰ Julian Sefton-Green et al., *The Routledge International Handbook of Creative Learning* (Routledge, 2011).

⁴¹ Liora Bresler, *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2007).

⁴² Sefton-Green et al., *The Routledge International Handbook of Creative Learning*.

⁴³ Koji Matsunobu, “Creativity of Formulaic Learning: Pedagogy of Imitation and Repetition” in Sefton-Green et al.

cultural contexts. The motto of Suzuki’s commercial school, for instance, translates to “first character, then ability”—a mantra he repeated frequently when discussing his own pedagogical approach.⁴⁴

Repetition of physical motions is essential both to *kata* pedagogy and the Suzuki approach. Indeed, repetition is perhaps one of the most dependably preserved aspects of the method (but also one of the most misunderstood, as we will see in O’Connor’s engagement with Suzuki’s ideas). Such repetition is especially present in the ways students are instructed to practice—repeated motions, musical sections, as well as daily practice schedules and lesson routines—but also in the limited range of repertoire covered in a student’s first years, and the form and contents of group classes and summer institutes. Robert Fink has noted that this degree of repetition proscribed by the Suzuki method was particularly “uncomfortable” for American students and their families.⁴⁵ I have observed, however, such discomfort results mostly in the studios of teachers who did not fully understand or explain the intentions and meanings behind such repetitive practices. For instance, after months of repetitive practice in other contexts, every student in Ronda Cole’s studio is tasked with critically repeating a particularly difficult passage in the final Book 1 piece, a Gavotte by F. J. Gossec, 1500 times (see Figure 4.2) in order to play the entire piece at a standard required to “graduate” from the book. In order to play the passage cleanly, the student needs to be able to control the placement of their arm, hand, and finger base joint in order to place it on a C# and then a C natural immediately afterwards, and also to be able to lift each finger with rhythmic consistency in the descent from their fourth finger to the open string. I have seen Cole introduce this challenge to students, which is partially designed to help them make an otherwise difficult finger pattern “into easy,” as Cole often notes, but also partially to ensure that all students have thoroughly internalized

⁴⁴ Suzuki and Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*, 66.

⁴⁵ Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 227.

and embraced the purpose and process of repetitive practice—“brain training,” as she calls it. While a few students initially wince at this challenge, most have already learned the rewards of such extensive careful repetition and accept the assignment without incident. Indeed, by the time Cole's students have finished learning the Gavotte and graduate from Book 1, they are able to perform the piece flawlessly at an impressively quick tempo, a feat that separates them from many other students their age (most of Cole's students graduate Book 1 before the age of 8)—which onlookers at institutes and recitals often attribute to the students' “talent.”

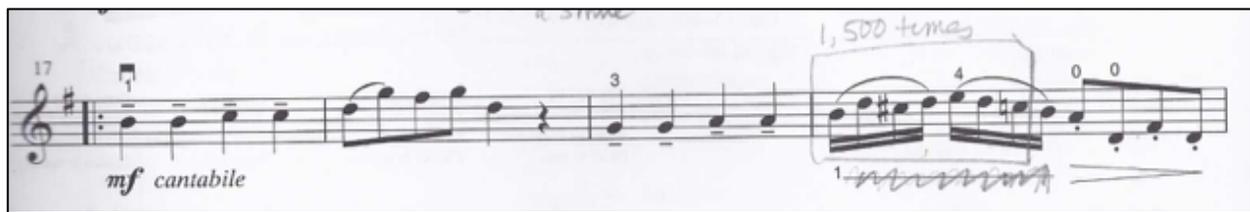


Figure 4.2: “Gavotte Spot” (in drawn box) in one of Ronda Cole's reference copies of Book 1.⁴⁶

Returning to the story of Suzuki's method development, only after his diverse musical experiences in Japan and Europe did he begin contemplating pedagogy. A few months after marrying Waltroud in Berlin, Suzuki returned with her to Japan to begin a career as a musician and teach at the university level.⁴⁷ The story of how Suzuki first thought to develop a method has been retold so many times that it has gained a mythological quality, but in almost all versions of the story, the violinist had a type of epiphany after being tasked to teach lessons to three year-olds Toshiya Eto and Koji Toyoda (both of whom became professionals).⁴⁸ As Suzuki described it,

⁴⁶ All of Cole's students are required to copy all of the markings in each book before they can begin studying the songs it contains.

⁴⁷ Kerstin Wartberg, “Shinichi Suzuki: Pionier Der Musikerziehung” (Deutsches Suzuki Institut, 2009). Regarding the spread of this story, I have heard it told in lessons, in institute assemblies, in the Suzuki Journal, on the websites of Suzuki teachers explaining the method, and in personal discussions with a range of teachers.

⁴⁸ Wartberg.

One day when we were practicing at the house of my younger brother, it hit me like a flash: all Japanese children speak Japanese! This thought struck me like a flash of light in a dark night. Since they all speak Japanese so easily and fluently, there must be a secret; and this must be training. Indeed, all children everywhere in the world are brought up by a perfect educational method: their mother tongue. Why not apply this method to other faculties? I felt I had made a tremendous discovery.⁴⁹

This moment of epiphany (often described in the American literature as a flash of genius, an ironic but emblematic example of the ways Western understandings of creativity and genius intermingle with Suzuki's basic belief in the cultivated nature of ability) prompted Suzuki to turn exclusively to the education of very young children in the 1930s. It is worth noting that, as Chapter 1 has discussed, neither Suzuki's idea of talent as cultivation nor the metaphor of music as a language were entirely new.⁵⁰ Regardless, his method quickly became emblematic internationally of a cultivation-centric approach to education. As Suzuki's success became more widely known, his school raised the funds to record one of their recitals and sent it to the American media. John Kendall and other American teachers first visited the Talent Education school in Matsumoto, and then Suzuki began his formative visits to the United States, beginning with his students much-documented tour in 1964.⁵¹ From that point, Suzuki taught hundreds of teachers around the world and saw the establishment of Method associations around the globe.⁵²

Much has already been written about Shinichi Suzuki's life, philosophy, and his powerful personal presence as a teacher and speaker in the United States.⁵³ No sources, however, continue on

⁴⁹ Suzuki and Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*, 2.

⁵⁰ In particular, see the discussion of Suzuki's direct adoption of some of the Hohmann violin method in Mehl, "Cultural Translation in Two Directions." "There are so many similarities between the preface of Hohmann's Practical Violin School – which may possibly be up to 140 years old – and the Suzuki method, that one cannot help but wonder if Suzuki knew of this method when he developed his philosophy" (5).

⁵¹ John Kendall, *The Suzuki® Violin Method in American Music Education* (Alfred Music, 1973).

⁵² Evelyn Hermann, *Shinichi Suzuki: The Man and His Philosophy* (Alfred Music, 1999), 54.

⁵³ Hermann, *Shinichi Suzuki*; Kendall, *The Suzuki® Violin Method in American Music Education*; Suzuki and Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*; Dr. Shinichi Suzuki and Mary Louise Nagata, *Ability Development from Age Zero* (Alfred Music, 2014); Alfred Garson, *Suzuki Twinkles: An Intimate Portrait* (Alfred Music, 2001); Masaaki Honda, *The Vehicle of Music -- Reflections on a Life with Shinichi Suzuki and the Talent Education Movement* (Alfred Music, 2002); Mari Yoshihara, *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music* (Temple University Press, 2007); Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*; "Shinichi Suzuki," Suzuki Association of the Americas, accessed April 7, 2016, <https://suzukiassociation.org/about/suzuki-method/shinichi-suzuki/>; David R. Collins, *Dr. Shinichi Suzuki: Teaching Music from the Heart* (Morgan Reynolds, 2002);

to discuss the ongoing life and culture of the Suzuki Method in the two decades since Suzuki's death in 1998. The Suzuki Association of the Americas certifies a wide variety of teacher trainers to instruct new Suzuki teachers in institutes and education programs around the country. While I have seen a number of pedagogical variations because of regional trends and the influence of particular master teachers, there remains a central core of practices that are emphasized for all Suzuki teachers. Namely, the concept of the "Suzuki triangle," which expects parents to act as home teachers on the six days each week the student does not see the Suzuki teacher; including reading Suzuki's *Every Child Can*, attending and taking notes at every lesson, and beginning violin lessons with their children to model dedicated practice and musical immersion; daily listening to the CD or MP3 recording of the student's current book; as well as regular group classes in which many students come together to play the common repertoire and practice ensemble skills.

Thanks in part to its pervasiveness, the "Suzuki Method" summons a wide range of associations.⁵⁴ Regardless of whether a musician or parent sees the approach as enlightened or ineffective, the ubiquity of the Suzuki name within (and beyond) American educational circles is undeniable. Such ubiquity renders inquiry into "the method" both rich and challenging.⁵⁵ On one hand, I have easily been able to access and observe hundreds of teachers and students associated with the method. On the other hand, partly because of the varied approaches to teacher training and the number of uncertified teachers using the method books, and partly because of more structurally

Mehl, *Not By Love Alone*; Ray Landers, *Is Suzuki Education Working in America?* (Alfred Music, 1987); Louise Behrend, *The Suzuki Approach* (Alfred Music, n.d.).

⁵⁴ I have discussed the Suzuki method with a range of non-Suzuki teachers and parents, professional musicians, and non-musicians. While a handful had heard of the method but had little knowledge of it, the remainder of respondents offered a wide range of thoughts, from negative opinions (the method does not provide students with adequate reading skills; the method is robotic and dull for students and burns them out) to positive ones that refer to a number of qualities of the method as described here.

⁵⁵ Currently, the rights to the Suzuki name and teaching method—along with the regulation of teacher certification courses, method book development, and other organizational matters—are controlled by the International Suzuki Association (ISA), a nonprofit organization comprised of a number of subsidiary regional groups including the Suzuki Association of the Americas (SAA), the largest and oldest of the lot. As the ISA has estimated, around 300,000 students in the United States alone study an instrument through the Suzuki Method See: "Talent Education? Expands Throughout the World," accessed September 5, 2017, http://www.suzukimethod.or.jp/english/E_mthd121.html.

and culturally significant interpretations and reappropriations of Suzuki's ideas, the method's popularity corresponds to a wide variation of implementations, some of which bear no resemblance to the pedagogical approach practiced by Shinichi Suzuki during his lifetime.

Moreover, some of the main emphases of contemporary Suzuki teachers correspond with certain American parenting philosophies and styles, and other aspects have been adjusted to more directly speak to the goals of American parents. For example, as Annette Lareau has discussed, the more commonly middle- and upper-class "concerted cultivation" parenting style "entails an emphasis on children's structured activities, language development and reasoning in the home, and active intervention in schooling" that complements Suzuki's vision of parent's active role in cultivating music immersively, like a language—one that requires significant educational, financial, and temporal resources.⁵⁶ Indeed, one of O'Connor's and Wiley's objections to the Suzuki Method's model is that its requirements make it nearly impossible for certain students and types of families to succeed. Such requirements are virtually impossible for working-class families who practice what Lareau has called the "achievement of natural growth" (Lareau's use of "natural" better describing the perceived, rather than the actual, learning process), which involves children being "granted more autonomy to manage their own affairs in institutions outside of the home," both because of ideological approaches to learning and childhood, and because of financial and logistical necessity. This mutually reinforcing nexus of (social, cultural, socioeconomic) capital and ideology drives the pedagogical approach of Suzuki teachers like Ronda Cole, who are thus able to help these more privileged students successfully cultivate the variety of musical skills that appear to others as signifiers of innate talent.

Nonetheless, contemporary Suzuki teacher trainers and Suzuki himself have both aimed to reorient the European-influenced conversations around talent this dissertation has explored,

⁵⁶ Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (University of California Press, 2003), 32.

rejecting questions like those being asked by influential thinkers and musicians around the time Suzuki was developing his method, like Auer (quoted above) and Carl Seashore: “which children possess musical ability of a high order and may therefore be given the opportunity to become artists?”⁵⁷ Rather than engaging with discourses that assumed talent to be something innately possessed in greater quantities by budding geniuses or future superstars, Suzuki did not avoid the term or idea of “talent,” but redefined it as something acquired through exposure and education: “man is born without talent.”⁵⁸ Rather than connecting the development of talent with the common goal of fostering geniuses like those discussed by Francis Galton, Suzuki stated that the telos of a talented child is not achieving a position on the far end of a Gaussian curve, but rather achieving a happy and noble life: “My prayer is that all children on this globe may become fine human beings, happy people of superior ability, and I am devoting all my energies to making this come about, for I am convinced that all children are born with this potential.”⁵⁹

As a pedagogue and as a person, Shinichi Suzuki embodied the goals of his pedagogical approach—just as Mark O’Connor’s multi-genre celebrity, virtuosity, and sense of American nationalism often serves as an emblem of his teaching method. Suzuki never achieved extraordinariness as a performer, but, as so many teachers who studied with him have told me, he undeniably cultivated an intimate and inspiring relationship with the inner process of making music, and he conveyed this love for the lived practice of musicianship to the teachers and students he instructed. Rather than seeking distinction with his own playing, or contributing original musical compositions or even interpretations of the canonized literature he included in his method, Suzuki hoped that his method would encourage more parents to give their children an opportunity to gain some degree of fluency in music-making. Ironically, to summon his American contemporary Carl

⁵⁷ Seashore, *The Psychology of Musical Talent*.

⁵⁸ Suzuki and Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*, 5.

⁵⁹ Suzuki and Suzuki, 87.

Seashore a second time, Suzuki believed in the wide applicability of his method to the point of suggesting something like a purely socialist education movement to help all children be given the joy of playing music: “Many babies who could have been educated failed to be educated on account of poverty. But there is also failure due to bad educational methods. It should be the responsibility of the state to see that this does not happen.”⁶⁰ While Suzuki was not alive to witness the approach of the O’Connor method, he may have equated the more *laisse faire* approach of the new method’s teachers with this category of bad educational methods—though not using the same type of rhetoric O’Connor has deployed. Nevertheless, the tension Suzuki expresses in the quotation above—something I describe as the fundamental paradox of talent in pedagogical and larger social discourses—is not only central to each method’s assertions regarding natural ability, but its interaction with race, class, and privilege.

Mark O’Connor

“In the A New American School of String Playing, rather than merely counting the beats in a measure, we want you to feel rhythm and groove. That is creative. Counting beats can be academic. Rather than playing in unison all the time in group class, we want you to play harmony, counterpoint and rhythm. Not just having to listen to your own part of the music for years.”⁶¹

Unlike Suzuki, who studied European music, married a German woman, and traveled frequently to the United States and other countries to learn from other teachers and discuss his method, the national influences and motivations of Mark O’Connor’s pedagogy are unilaterally conceived. Among the many reasons he sites for founding his method, almost all deal specifically with (his conception of) Americanness: for instance, the creative supremacy and richness of American music in particular; the diverse pedagogical needs of American students not being addressed by other primarily non-American methods and schools; and America’s need for a new

⁶⁰ Suzuki and Suzuki, 107.

⁶¹ Transcribed from a picture of a slide shown to teacher trainees in the 2015 O’Connor String Camp in New York City.

generation of innovative composers and musicians to represent the country's rich tradition of string music on the global stage. At the heart of the method's many metaphors and goals is an affirmation of individuality, creativity, and, indeed, a purposeful rejection of Suzuki's assertion about the nature of talent.⁶² For Mark O'Connor, talent—a word he uses often in discussions of his method, in addition to frequent mentions of genius, virtuosos, prodigies, and related ideas discussed in Chapter 1—is linked to each musician's inherent uniqueness and desire for individual expression. Instead of endorsing anything remotely repetitive or uniform, the O'Connor method emphasizes inspiration, improvisation, and individuality, explaining that students exposed to the inherently appealing American repertoire of the books, and given an opportunity to have fun with the music, will experience a spark of interest and desire that will subsequently drive them to pursue the more technical aspects of the instrument.

O'Connor often cites his own exceptionally successful career as a performer and composer as a testament to the possibilities of his method. Born in 1961, he came of age around the same time that Suzuki's violin method was gaining momentum in the United States.⁶³ As he recounts his origin tale—one repeated often at his institutes and in interviews with journalists—he was first exposed to music through learning classical-style guitar as a young child. “With the guitar, I was talented, but I felt restricted from some natural pathway for myself. I had an innate sense that if I got hold of a fiddle, the whole music world would open up to me. I begged for three years, and when I finally got

⁶² Of course, O'Connor's ideological opposition to Suzuki cannot be separated from issues of political economy—and, indeed, his obvious financial motivations for denouncing the Suzuki method. While the economic aspects of the relationship between the Suzuki and O'Connor communities are not the main focus of this chapter, I want to emphasize that the ideological and the economic are inextricably intertwined and that economic considerations and forces are eternally present in the background of my analysis.

⁶³ As has been discussed in much Suzuki literature, and as both Cole and Wiley explained in interviews, this early incorporation of the Suzuki method in the states was not immediately successful, with many American assumptions about music teaching—for instance, starting 4th graders rather than 4 year-olds—not granting the type of results Suzuki had achieved in Japan. O'Connor came of age during this time, when Suzuki students represented a hodgepodge of skills and non-skills that did not necessarily represent the violin or Suzuki in a positive light to outsiders.

one, it turned out to be true.”⁶⁴ Once O’Connor began fiddle lessons, he explains, his ascent to stardom, made possible by his dedicated “stage mother,” as he affectionately called her, was rapid: his first teacher, the classical/folk player Barbara Lamb (who was herself only 14 at the time), recognized his enthusiasm for fiddling and encouraged him to attend the National Old-Time Fiddlers Contest in Weiser, Idaho.⁶⁵ It was there that O’Connor first witnessed renowned fiddler Benny Thomasson and experienced a moment quite similar to what Suzuki described with his first major teacher, Karl Klinger, if for different musical reasons: “When I heard Benny, I was transfixed. . . . I knew right away he was the master and he was the one I wanted to emulate. If you gave him a theme, he’d create a variation that was as strong or even stronger than the original. Even at an early age, that blew me away.”⁶⁶ The following year, under Thomasson’s guidance, O’Connor became the youngest contestant ever to win the Grand Masters Fiddle competition at age 13, winning dozens of other competitions after that point—on the violin as well as the guitar and mandolin.

The young violinist went on to study jazz with violinist Stéphane Grapelli in his late teens and, as he described on his website, subsequently “became the most in demand session musician of any instrument and in any genre for a 3-year period, appearing on more top ten hits in the country, recording over 500 albums, and recording with everyone - Dolly Parton, James Taylor, Paul Simon, Randy Travis, The Judds, the list is too long to print.”⁶⁷ In addition to performing as a classical, bluegrass, and jazz violinist, O’Connor became active as a composer of classical music inspired by other American genres—penning, for instance, an improvised violin concerto that requires the solosit to extemporize for the duration of the 40-minute scored symphonic piece.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ “Mark O’Connor - String Ties,” No Depression, December 31, 2003, <http://nodepression.com/article/mark-oconnor-string-ties>.

⁶⁵ “Mark O’Connor - String Ties.” Lamb describes her experiences teaching O’Connor (her first student) here: “Bio | Barbara Lamb Music,” accessed June 18, 2018, <http://barbaralamb.net/bio/>.

⁶⁶ “Mark O’Connor - String Ties.”

⁶⁷ “Mark O’Connor Official Website - Bio,” accessed September 14, 2017, <https://markoconnor.com/bio>.

⁶⁸ As O’Connor states in his program notes for the piece, “It is the first concerto to feature an entirely improvised solo part over a through-composed orchestral score.”

Each of O'Connor's diverse experiences is reflected in his vision of the method—which he and Pamela Wiley both conceive as representing a more comprehensive, representatively diverse, “American Music System” (AMS). His first forays into the educational realm were a series of summer programs, beginning with a fiddle camp in Nashville in 1994.⁶⁹ The camps attracted aspiring fiddlers (and fiddlers inspired by O'Connor) every summer from that year onwards, though the camps assumed many different names and were held in a variety of locations. It is these camp experiences that O'Connor cites as his inspiration for founding a more comprehensive method that represents the specifically American context of his musical education. As he recalled, “I've always wanted to be part of an American school of string playing. I had always read about the European tradition of violin playing from Russia, Germany and France. But as I got further into classical music, I noticed there was no school of American violin playing. The styles that are taught here in conservatories are European.”⁷⁰ The first volume of O'Connor's method book series was published in 2009, and the first summer institute he held with the official “O'Connor Method” label was held at the Berklee College of Music in 2011. The books and their sequence of songs, which O'Connor presents as the backbone of the method (unlike Suzuki's more philosophical conception of his method), consist not only of North American-derived repertoire, from “Boil 'Em Cabbage Down” to songs from the classical, folk, Latin, jazz, rock, ragtime traditions, but also of a semi-autobiographical blend of pictures and stories from O'Connor's first experiences with the tunes, historical information about the songs, and suggestions for variation and improvisation. More than simply offering songs to play, these method books epitomize O'Connor's attitude toward the learning process: students should focus on the beauty of the songs, on cultivating a sense of wonder at and taking inspiration from great performers (like O'Connor) playing the same pieces contained in

⁶⁹ “The Formation of the Mark O Connor Fiddle Camps,” accessed September 14, 2017, <http://markoconnorblog.blogspot.com/2016/12/the-formation-of-mark-o-connor-fiddle.html>.

⁷⁰ “Mark O'Connor - String Ties.”

the books, and on developing technical proficiency—and the desire to cultivate it—will follow. Elements like posture, technical precision, and repetitive practice are more a means to the end of a student’s enjoyment of and creative engagement with a song, and are rarely the main focus of teachers using the method books. It is evident that this “achievement of natural growth” model reflects O’Connor’s own recollection of his learning process—one he sees as ideal, and applicable to any student.

O’Connor did not craft the method books on his own; he neither has the experience teaching beginner violinists nor the type of education essential for an effective pedagogical publication.⁷¹ Early in the process of conceptualizing the method, he worked closely with a number of other educators and musicians, with particular input from Bob Phillips, an experienced school string instructor and teacher educator.⁷² Later on in the process, O’Connor became acquainted with Pamela Wiley through a multi-year relationship with her daughter, a violin teacher and performer. After being introduced to O’Connor’s sequence of repertoire, Wiley, a long-time Suzuki teacher, was immediately convinced that the method was an improvement upon her current method, described further in the subsequent section.⁷³ In short, the O’Connor method books and teacher training courses contain a conspicuous admixture of perspectives—regarding parent involvement, weekly practice, which skills to teach, how to teach them, etc. This admixture has resulted in students, parents, and teachers engaging with the books in significantly more diverse and customized ways than those within Suzuki communities. Rather than reflecting some type of flaw in the application of

⁷¹ Interview with Pamela Wiley, February 26, 2018.

⁷² “Bob Phillips | Alfred Music,” accessed May 12, 2018, <https://www.alfred.com/authors/bob-phillips/>. As Wiley explained of this early part of the process, “Mark went to Alfred publishing and said, I want to copy the Suzuki method but with American music content and Bob helped him get started. I got on board, then Alfred wanted the exclusive rights to it, Mark got tough about that, he wanted to do it more on his own. He paid Bob Phillips a substantial amount of money and made him sign a non-disclosure agreement saying he would not talk about Mark’s intentions for the method. And Mark self-published it, he spent most of his savings to self-publish those first two books, and then I got on board to help him finish it, do the teacher training.” (Personal interview)

⁷³ Wiley taught the first waves of teacher training courses for the method around the country, and worked closely with O’Connor to develop and promote the method from about 2009 to 2016.

O'Connor's method, however, this diversity fits well with his (and Wiley's) conception of the method—that exposure to the repertoire and a diverse set of inspiring performances of it is the most essential piece of the larger puzzle.

Despite his denial that his books were specifically modeled after the Suzuki method, O'Connor has promoted his method as a replacement for Suzuki. As he has increasingly noted, he does not intend for his books to be used as a supplement, but a fundamentally different approach to learning music. Whether as a musician, a composer, or the spokesperson for his educational enterprises, O'Connor has constantly emphasized the lack of creativity, individuality, and certain musical skills in the American classical string community—something he argues that the Suzuki method embodies and perpetuates. For example, at the first iteration of his Manhattan-based O'Connor Method camp, O'Connor described his experience of looking for children's string lessons in the Bay Area: "I just signed them up for violin classes and I would show up and they're all playing in unison the melodies of these little minuets and etudes, over and over again for years, and in two years, invariably they both wanted to quit, and they did." In a blog post entitled "Suzuki's BIGGEST Lie," O'Connor summarizes his case against Suzuki (revealing, as usual, much more about his own positionality than Suzuki's philosophy):

Was it all just about money, selling an exotic product from Japan to unsuspecting American violin kids? Certainly that place nor did the man know much about classical violin in 1950s [sic]. In the aftermath of the treachery and the deception, Suzuki's pedagogic advice should be considered an undesirable approach in learning to play the violin, such as his insistence for a constant repetition of a small body of repertoire from 250 years ago for sometimes up to 5 and even 10 years, memorization-ear-training as opposed to ear-training one can use musically, taking violin along with the parent in lessons, all-unison group class for many years with others playing the same line, and no creative musical training, theory, improvisation, composition, or stylistic diversity [...] The Suzuki Method basically develops technique by way of massive amounts of repetition along with obedience-based learning (follow my hand, do as I do, I am always right and you are always wrong approach) that has spawned the least creative 50-year era in violin history.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ "Suzuki's BIGGEST Lie."

To O'Connor, the Suzuki method's outdated repertoire, emphasis on ostensibly thoughtless repetition, and focus on uniformity is the archetypical example of many non-American schools of string playing that fail to capitalize on the creative potential of students, eventually causing them to stop enjoying music lessons and stop playing entirely.

Upon examining the number of similarities between the two methods' books and educational toolboxes, however, one might argue that O'Connor's professed rivalry with Suzuki appears more like a pedagogical Oedipal complex, or at least a deep anxiety of influence. Although his method was designed in part to render the Suzuki method obsolete, the specter of Suzuki's pedagogical position arose continually in my fieldwork with O'Connor teachers, summer camps, and even in his own writings.⁷⁵ For instance, on a slide O'Connor showed my class of teacher trainers in 2016, he quoted himself saying, "Children are born into this world as good little citizens already possessing beautiful hearts." I was immediately reminded of the more widely distributed quotes of Suzuki, which states, "Teaching music is not my main purpose. I want to make good citizens. If children hear fine music from the day of their birth and learn to play it, they develop sensitivity, discipline and endurance. They get a beautiful heart."⁷⁶ While O'Connor's misinterpretation (or intentional modification) here is important—Suzuki is claiming that children acquire beautiful hearts through musical talent education, and O'Connor is describing children as innately equipped with beautiful hearts—the similarities are also representative of many aspects of the O'Connor method stance. The Jeffersonian understanding of talent that O'Connor supports—the mythos of the creative spark, the discovery of inner genius through exposure and inspiration, an archetypically American creative force that exists as latent potential in certain students—is partly threatened by

⁷⁵ Wiley, who met O'Connor as he was beginning to conceptualize an American music method, notes that he explicitly set out to copy and improve upon the Suzuki method, borrowing successful elements of the early books and adapting them for his purposes.

⁷⁶ Masaaki Honda, *Suzuki Changed My Life* (Alfred Music, 1976), 150.

Suzuki's assertion that a student's failure to become a proficient musician is a failure of the teacher, parent, and environment—in essence, the *method* of music instruction—rather than an innate lack.

While generally agreeing with O'Connor's position about music and musicality, Pamela Wiley (along with many other O'Connor method teachers) take a much more inclusive view of the method's relationship with Suzuki's philosophies and the teaching techniques promoted within the Suzuki complex. Though Wiley supports the ideological assertions that O'Connor is making about repertoire, musicianship, and creativity, she often quotes Suzuki in lessons and has tried to dispel the notion that the two approaches are incompatible. Rather than seeing it as an antithesis, Wiley has described the O'Connor method as “an evolution of the Suzuki method,” adding, “I don't think Mark would have had any success if the Suzuki method had not done the groundwork.”⁷⁷ While I have also argued that these two methods are not utterly antithetical and revisit their many commonalities and shared goals in the chapter's conclusion, their contrasting treatments of musical talent are indeed vastly different. O'Connor's sense of rivalry is, in fact, symptomatic of an individual-centered perspective to music making that also values the idea of individualized distributions of talent. This perspective is present in the many fiddle contests in which O'Connor method students often compete, as well as the general celebration of stardom and musical celebrity essential to American musical culture more broadly.⁷⁸ Such a focus on the outward achievement and individual (improvisatory, creative) expression of individual musicians was not emphasized in Suzuki's framework, and is still not stressed in the undeniably Americanized contemporary Suzuki complex.

⁷⁷ Personal interview with Pamela Wiley, February 26, 2018.

⁷⁸ O'Connor's focus on individual achievement is not in opposition to his emphasis on ensemble and collective musical experiences, as members of jam sessions and group classes in the O'Connor method are rarely asked to play in unison or sublimate their own unique approach to the repertoire.

In large part because O'Connor conceives his method to be a curated and contextualized sequence of songs, the teacher trainings and summer camps that he has arranged are not as uniform or pedagogically particular as the Suzuki institutes and trainings I have attended around the country. As we will see in the case of Wiley's approach to teaching her wide variety of students, the result of this emphasis on songs over specific teaching points or philosophical orientation of those teaching points is the celebration of a wide variety of musical experiences, preferences, skills, genre focuses—and, as was present in the discourses of the O'Connor camps and teaching contexts I have observed—discourses that acknowledge the presence of natural ability in students. As O'Connor stated in an email to his method's listserv, "I can help teachers find those lightbulb moments with their students with the amazing materials and lessons plans from the O'Connor Method."⁷⁹

The preceding discussion of these two teaching methods' inceptions—the founders' own music-educational experiences, their goals in establishing a new method, their conceptions of the distribution and cultivation of musical ability—provides important context for the more specific applications of their methods I analyze in the remainder of the chapter. O'Connor has never maintained his own studio, and Suzuki's own teaching experiences were geographically and historically removed from the ways his method is practiced today by American teachers participating in the Suzuki complex. The remainder of the chapter, therefore, zooms in on the ways two teachers have applied and adapted these methods over decades. While the methods' assertions about music learning serve as powerful guides and inspirations for these teachers, their lived experiences with hundreds of students over the course of their careers have further reinforced and refined their ideologies of talent, natural ability, and the ideal role of music education.

⁷⁹ Email to the listserv of the O'Connor Violin Method, March 29, 2018.

Teaching Talent

During the first several years of my research, a striking number of parents, students, and teachers named this chapter's main interlocutors, Ronda Cole and Pamela Wiley, as exemplars of the pedagogical possibilities of their respective methods. Both teachers are accustomed to serving as models for their method: they have worked as teacher trainers at institutes around the country; their students are accustomed to being video-taped and observed for teachers in training.⁸⁰ Here, I weave together discussions of Cole's and Wiley's formative experiences, teaching philosophies, and pedagogical techniques—all of which are guided by their differing positions about the nature of musical talent. Indeed, the title of this section and chapter, “teaching talent,” is intended as a double entendre: while Wiley has configured her teaching around the position that her students *are* the “talent” whom she teaches, Cole maintains that her students *become* talented learners, and she teaches them *how* to be talented.⁸¹ Following the broader discussion of these two teachers, I analyze lessons in which Cole and Wiley each introduce students to their first notes on the violin.

Cole's and Wiley's physical studio spaces, and the broader places in which they are located, serve as a helpful introduction to (and rich encapsulation of) their divergent teaching praxes.⁸² The Northern Virginia Suzuki Music School (NVSMS) was founded by Ronda Cole and is collaboratively run by Cole and the other two teachers whose studios it includes: David Strom (since 2003) and Chris Sanchez (since 2015), both of whom were trained by Cole.⁸³ All of the private lessons of

⁸⁰ In my experiences and according to Cole and Wiley alike, students' behaviors in both studios are not significantly affected by observers, as they are accustomed to adults watching and both teachers have framed observations as more geared toward the teacher's actions than the student's.

⁸¹ To frame this distinction according to Chapter 1's typology, the former sense of talent as a collective noun is discussed in the section on talent as “skill,” and the latter sense of talent as something that is developed is discussed in the section on “heredity” (and environment).

⁸² Here, I intend “praxis” in Friere's sense mentioned at the start of the chapter.

⁸³ I want to extend my thanks to Strom and Sanchez for their extensive willingness to help with my project—speaking to me about their teaching experiences and sending lesson and group class videos, among much else. While this chapter now focuses primarily on Ronda Cole, I have learned so much from everyone at NVSMS, and intend to extend this preliminary chapter significantly and include the voices of more students, parents, and teachers in the community.

NVSMS take place on the lower level of Cole’s contemporary, custom-built house, situated on a hilly lot enveloped by trees in the affluent Washington D.C. suburb of McLean, Virginia. When a student and her practice parent arrive, they park on Cole’s steep driveway and walk around to a separate studio entryway in the rear of the house.⁸⁴ After removing their shoes and the violin from its case in the tile-covered reception area, the student and parent enter Cole’s large studio room and place their lesson notebook and sheet music on a stand in front of her. Only water is permitted in the studio; all other food or drink remains in the car.

Cole arranges every corner of her studio with intention. She always sits in the same chair, and the students always stand facing her on the same part of the rug beneath their feet (after they graduate from the foot chart that trains them to adopt this position). The clock hangs on the wall directly behind the student in Cole’s line of sight, such that it does not distract the student and she can keep close track of the lesson’s segments without conspicuously averting her gaze. Mirrors concealing closets full of sheet music and related items in the back of the room reflect the wooded backyard framed by a large picture window, and more importantly, the back side of students as they play, enabling both parents and Cole to observe and correct students’ posture from multiple vantage points. Photos of Suzuki and former students—LisaBeth Lambert of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Megan and Liz Freivogel of the Jupiter string quartet, Nick Kendall of *Time for Three*—line the walls, interspersed with awards and certificates Cole has accumulated during her nearly five decades of teaching. The large Persian rug that covers most of the floor features a flower in the center on which wiggly students may be requested to “jump the wiggles out”—which has become a type of ritual in the studio. On the back of a baby grand piano beside Cole’s teaching chair are an arsenal of

⁸⁴ As her student policy document states, with a level of detail characteristic of her teaching, “When backing out of the driveway, it is helpful to keep your eyes on the left side view mirror, staying one to two feet away from the stairs and the mailbox. That way you will not hit the stairs or mailbox on the left as you back out and will be safely away from the timber edge on the right. Please back up until you are cleared the driveway rather than cutting the wheel too early and driving over the plantings by the street.”

toys and props that she uses to convey various teaching points. The couch on which parents sit as they observe, taking detailed notes for home practice, is positioned close enough for them to see every detail of Cole's instructions, but far enough behind the student that they do not impose on their child's attention. Cole does not teach lessons in any other space, aside from her weeks spent at summer Suzuki institutes and workshops across the country. In order to study with her, some families drive for hours from distant corners of the D.C. metropolitan area before parking, finally, in the correct spot in her steep driveway. Students sometimes arrive as early as 6 a.m. in order to fit in an hour-long lesson before school.

In contrast, Pam Wiley's teaching spaces serve as physical manifestations of her pedagogical diversity and flexibility. Over the course of a week I spent with her in South Carolina, she taught in a room she and her husband (also a violin teacher) rent in Charleston; a recreation room of a Methodist church; a community music center called Hungry Monk; her house in the unincorporated rural town of Jacksonboro; and the school building of a Baptist church in the small city of Walterboro. We also drove to the home of a family in an affluent area of Mount Pleasant, where Wiley's daughter (also a violin teacher) gives lessons to its five children, and visited the former site of the Jacksonboro Fiddle Club (pictured in Figure 4.3) down the road from Wiley's house, which she founded to offer lessons and violins to children in the area who would not otherwise be able to learn the instrument because of cost, location, and other demands on their families' time. Wiley's most regular studio space in Charleston is sprinkled with instruments—an electric piano, an amplifie, a guitar, her own violin, and a few other fiddles on display. Sometimes parents are present in the small room; sometimes they leave their children and return when the lesson is over. In the course of each lesson, Wiley drifts between instruments and locations in the room, accompanying, demonstrating, and providing harmonic and other musical context for the students' playing.



Figure 4.3: The site of Pamela Wiley's Jacksonboro Fiddle Club. Photo by author.

Regardless of the location, Wiley brings her guitar and her violin, adapting to the spaces in which she and her students convene. Indeed, the single lesson she taught in her home, which I will examine in detail below, took place there only because it was a convenient location for the family, who had recently contacted Wiley for an introductory lesson after hearing about her free Jacksonboro fiddle club. In contrast to the stringent policies of Cole's studio—a sign instructing students not to touch the wall when taking off their shoes, the understanding that no food will be in sight, let alone consumed during a lesson—Wiley's students often munch on chips or drink soda between songs, and sit in chairs playing in ways that they find comfortable.

These differences between Wiley's and Cole's relationships with their teaching spaces are not happenstance; Wiley would neither prefer nor practically be able to mandate that her students never eat or drink during their lessons, and Cole would not so immediately establish the attention to detail she achieves in students without demonstrating the same level of detail in the environment she has

cultivated. Wiley creatively adjusts and adapts to the eclectic and multi-sited American communities she serves; Cole requires the families who are able to access her studio to adjust and adapt to her space. As it is with these teachers' treatment of spaces, so it is with their treatment of students and the development of their musical abilities.

Both teachers' backgrounds, while strikingly similar in certain ways (they are almost exactly the same age and existed in the same social circles during the decades that Wiley was a Suzuki teacher) provide important insights into their teaching approaches. Ronda Cole was raised in a musical family in New York and learned to play the violin from the age of nine, starting in a public school and with private lessons. She was also sonically surrounded by her mother's piano playing and recordings of classical music, granting her an ability to discriminate pitch that rivals that of any of the most accomplished classical musicians (including, of course, the ones raised in her studio). As Cole recalled, "we went from hearing my mother play in church as the organist and we would pretty much sit in the living room like, Norman Rockwell kind of family, and have that station on during dinner with Beethoven in the air."⁸⁵ In thinking back about these early experiences, Cole noted that they helped her develop musical interests and sensitivities that allowed her to cultivate her highly meticulous teaching style later on: "I didn't know I was learning to be talented then, but I was."⁸⁶

Pamela Wiley grew up in a small town in Minnesota, also in an affluent family, but without as much early exposure to classical music-making as Cole.⁸⁷ Her attending a high school with a band program piqued her interest in music during her teenaged years. Taking up percussion, Wiley became increasingly invested in music (in a variety of contexts), auditioning for all-state orchestra on

⁸⁵ Personal interview with Ronda Cole, September 10, 2014.

⁸⁶ Personal interview with Ronda Cole, September 10, 2014.

⁸⁷ As Wiley explains of her early musical experiences beyond her percussion experience, "So, and my parents, they had Dean Martin records. And I could read music, I could play the piano a little bit. And my teacher, she was pretty cool, she taught me how to chord, and I knew chords because of the guitar. I think somebody in my high school knew how to play the guitar." Personal interview with Pamela Wiley, April 17, 2018.

the timpani in her sophomore year. It was only at that point in her life, at age sixteen, that Wiley observed string playing in person for the first time. As she recalled,

So I was in the Minnesota all-state orchestra as the timpanist—I'm getting the chills when I say this—without ever having heard symphonic music, seen a violin [...] And I can remember the conductor [...] at one point he said, 'Miss Peterson! You are entrusted with one of the great timpani parts of all time and all you can do is just stare moony-eyed at some pimply-faced violinist.' He thought I was just being a goofy teenager, and I was being, like, traumatized, I mean, my life was changing, I was falling in love with violin, I was falling in love with symphonic music, I was figuring out, have I missed this boat, or how can I get in on this?⁸⁸

Wiley's recollection of this first impression of the violin radiates the type of enthusiasm and awe that she exuded in every lesson I saw her teach. Her subsequent path to becoming a professional violinist—practicing intensely during her college years, playing in the Harrisburg Symphony and becoming increasingly involved in old-time and other non-classical styles—also reflects her attitude toward music more generally. Her goal, as she noted, “is that people will feel self-satisfied by playing music, and they'll play in their community orchestras, or fiddle jams, or at home with their kids, and they'll play music because it's *music*, and not because they want to compete to get to the all-state orchestra and then get to the college orchestra and then get out there [as a professional].”⁸⁹ Wiley does not detect subtleties of pitch as immediately as some musicians, sometimes using a tuner to check each of her own and her students strings (which I have never seen occur in Cole's studio), often citing her late start as a violinist as one cause of this perceptual difference.⁹⁰ Wiley is deeply invested in helping her students develop the aural and physical capability to detect and perform subtle variations in intonation, however. But as Wiley's own career attests, the

⁸⁸ Personal interview with Pamela Wiley, April 17, 2018.

⁸⁹ Personal interview with Pamela Wiley, February 26, 2018.

⁹⁰ Wiley's long career as an orchestral musician in the Harrisburg Symphony attests to the fact that she is indeed able to orient her ears to subtle differences in intonation; she discusses being aware that cultivating a certain type of attention and state of mind allows her to listen in this way—a testament to the fact that “speed” in performing a task, as discussed in Chapter 1's typology, is not a universally applicable rubric for achievement. Old-time music, too, requires very minute manipulation of tones—for instance, “tweener” notes—to which Wiley very intentionally exposes her students.

type of skills that Cole cultivates from an early age in her students for a professional (classical) career are ancillary to learning music, as Wiley more holistically defines it.

Rather, in her own playing and that of her students, she aims to cultivate a sense of “musicality,” an ability to understand, appreciate, and enjoy playing music—to achieve a type of fluency (to summon Suzuki’s mother tongue metaphor, which Wiley often references herself) rather than some type of exceptionality or virtuosity. This diversity of genres and skill sets and types of natural ability fit into Wiley’s conception of an “American Music System,” a phrase she first heard from Mark O’Connor and which she believes his method books embody. She defined this system as “like the river system or the mountain system or the circulatory system. It’s just organic and grass-roots based, and not—it doesn’t have rules from above, it’s not highly organized, it’s not institutionalized. [...] And of course it’s going to be different for everybody. [...] If you’re looking for a cohesive definition of the American Music System, that would go kind of against the grain of the whole thing.”

Over the course of their extensive teaching careers, both Cole and Wiley have developed nuanced understandings of the environmental and biological influences of musical ability. Both offered stories and explanations that are consistent with recent scholarly literature in genetics, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology: namely, the influences of nature and nurture constantly interact, and neither is fully responsible for a student’s success (or failure) as a musician.⁹¹ As Wiley put it, “I think both things are true, I think talent is a result of nurturing and education, and that there’s something inborn about it.”⁹² Cole acknowledged, “we’ve got what we’ve got,” but understands this fact as a marker of possibilities rather than limitations. Wiley, too, noted, “you have

⁹¹ As David Shenk has explained this general theory, “There is no genetic foundation that gets laid before the environment enters in; rather, genes express themselves strictly in accordance with their environment. Everything that we are, from the first moment of conception, is a result of this process. We do not inherit traits directly from our genes. Instead, we *develop* traits through the dynamic process of gene-environment interaction.” Shenk, *The Genius in All of Us*, 18.

⁹² Personal interview with Pamela Wiley, April 22, 2018.

to do the best with what you've got." She elaborated, using other traits as a metaphor for musical abilities,

You're born a certain way. And some people are born, you know, just by luck, they're born beautiful. They have beautiful eyes and beautiful hair, and beautiful features, and they can be models, you know. And some people are born—they can run really fast. And everybody can train [...] and learn to run faster than they think they can. But there are some people who are just strung up right inside. Something about their muscles and their legs, and something about the way they're connected to their brain, that they're going to be able to run faster than anybody else, that's just given. And it's just the way we're born, and that's the hand you're dealt. My dad always said, "you have to play the hand you're dealt."⁹³

Despite their mutual support of an interactionist interpretation of musical ability development, however, Cole and Wiley have reached different conclusions about how this framework relates to their conception and treatment of "talent." Echoing Suzuki's sentiments, Cole averred that she stringently avoids making pronouncements about whether a student is more or less naturally musical, resisting it even in her own mind; indeed, she does not understand "musicality" to be a single quality at all, but as a diverse constellation of musical and non-musical skills.⁹⁴ "If you're saying this child is very gifted and this one isn't, you're going to teach them differently. Of course you have to teach them differently, but not by limiting your expectation of what's possible. Create the upward and onward pathway for that child. Whenever I catch myself faltering in that, I am full of self-loathing."⁹⁵ While Wiley agreed that "I don't talk about it, I think it's destructive to the kids to think about talent," she acknowledges that she considers certain students to be more naturally "gifted": "I'll come home and use that terminology [gifted, talented] with John. But I just mean that

⁹³ Personal interview with Pamela Wiley, April 22, 2018. As Cole explained about this point, "There are so many abilities that a musician or human being can develop, and the musician needs many of them. And so whatever our sensitivities and neurology and aural acuity and that kind of thing, that we might be born with, then it's really a matter of how we stimulate those things and balance it out and motivate it. Everybody's born with hundreds of different abilities, and it's a matter of building on it."

⁹⁴ In lessons, Cole works with her students on poetry recitation, articulation and vocabulary choices in their communication, techniques of concentration and critical thinking, history, music theory, psychology, and philosophy. In her estimation, each of these areas of growth inform and enrich her students' abilities to be talented learners.

⁹⁵ Interview with Ronda Cole, September 10, 2014.

they're quicker at it.” As the latter part of this statement implies, Wiley does not believe that these differences in natural ability interfere with her goals for her students: “What *most* people call talent—your child is talented—that level of talent is accessible to everyone.”⁹⁶ Rather than conceiving the development of talent as systematically as Cole, Wiley more readily acknowledges and adjusts to her students’ differences: “Like the tortoise and the hare thing. The hare can run fast right away because he’s that way, and the tortoise wins the race because he’s slow and steady and he wins the race. So which one’s more talented?”⁹⁷

The issue around which Cole and Wiley diverge most regards their understanding of their roles as teachers in relation to the interaction between environment and cultivation. Cole, like Suzuki, takes almost complete responsibility for her students’ achievements, seeing education simply as an equalizing force: “Whatever’s not there, it’s my job.”⁹⁸ As she explained of Suzuki teachers more generally, “We have to grow that for the child, the parent and the child participating of course, but our job is to grow that for them.” Instead of seeing musical ability as a single entity, Cole envisions a collection of “threads” that, once identified, can always be developed: “I am awakening the hundreds of threads of learning that need all to be in place, ultimately. And very few children just show up with everything fully charged, with all those avenues of learning and sensitivity and perceptions awakened.”⁹⁹ She added that teaching is not always an additive process, but one of “taking something away.”¹⁰⁰ Cole described this aspect of her role as analogous to a therapist, stating, “I know I can’t completely unravel psychological damage that walks in here. I can help. [...] But I can’t totally clean the slate.” Whether intentional or not, Cole’s reference to a *tabula rasa*—and

⁹⁶ Personal interview with Ronda Cole, September 10, 2014.

⁹⁷ Personal interview with Pamela Wiley, April 22, 2018.

⁹⁸ Cole continues, “As well as to acknowledge what is there so it continues happily along its growth path. Um, but anyone that you would see—almost anyone—that comes in and looks like a genius, they’ve just got all these threads happily stimulated.” Personal interview with Ronda Cole, September 10, 2014.

⁹⁹ Personal interview with Ronda Cole, September 10, 2014.

¹⁰⁰ This is partially why Cole only starts new students at a very young age, from three to five years old.

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that famously forwarded the concept of the human mind as a blank slate—is appropriate. Indeed, Locke's intervention against hegemonically motivated appeals to innate knowledge and ability is strikingly similar to Suzuki's philosophies around music.¹⁰¹

Rather than envisaging a specific set of competencies members of her studio must all develop, Pamela Wiley takes a broader vision of each student's musical growth and therefore a less thorough (or invasive, depending on one's perspective) approach to her role as teacher. As her tortoise and hare comment above suggests, even Wiley's understanding of talent acknowledges and celebrates diverse viewpoints—a level of acceptance and flexibility she brings to her teaching. Wiley does not assess and address each individual “thread” in her students, but presents learners with a wealth of musical information, challenging them to pick up as much as their desire and ability allows: “I mean there's the, ‘ok you're not ready for this, so you have to get a better position and better tone and better this and better that.’ [Or alternatively] ‘You want to play this? Rise to the occasion.’ There's either the ‘be prepared for it,’ or the ‘rise to the occasion.’ So I'll go for the rise to the occasion.”¹⁰²

Although Wiley teaches multiple lessons each week, she has noted that private lessons are not the most ideal format for her teaching goals. As she noted to me, “‘music education’ is an oxymoron. Because once you take music and chop it up and organize it [...] and make things testable and Every Good Boy Does Fine and all that, it ceases to be music.” Referencing the idea of music as a language, she thinks that students should more ideally be immersed consistently in informal, natural musical habitats—an essential aspect of what she describes as the American Music System. “Music is a language. And let me tell you, there is no organized way that kids learn their

¹⁰¹ As Locke stated, “Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas: — How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself.” Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 96.

¹⁰² Personal interview with Pamela Wiley, April 22, 2018.

language. [...] They're submersed in the environment, and they learn to speak the language to fit into the environment, period. They don't do step by step, they don't do the Twinkle of learning to speak English, and then the Lightly Row. They don't learn grammar, they don't learn the rules, they don't start tearing their language apart until they're in the 3rd grade."¹⁰³

Unsurprisingly, the ways Wiley and Cole teach students is similar to the way they approach teacher education within their methods. Wiley accepts that teachers will not all share the same priorities, level of intensity, level of education—in short, that they will not necessarily be like her or want to exactly imitate her teaching approach. Rather, she hopes for as many teachers as possible to utilize the O'Connor method, experience the songs and the ways they are played across the country, and to teach students in a way that works for themselves and their students.¹⁰⁴ Cole, on the other hand, feels strongly about her interpretation and application of the Suzuki method; she gives highly detailed instructions about teaching every note of each song (as with her students, she gives teacher trainees photos of her marked-up Suzuki books to copy into their own books and teach). In addition, she tells teachers specific ways to construct studio policies, format group class, form relationships with practice parents, and she also provides teachers with exact words and metaphors to use to evoke the desired psychological or physiological responses in students.

Wiley adapts to her students; Cole asks students to adapt to her. And so it is with their understanding of talent. Wiley builds upon each student's unique foundation of interests and abilities; Cole bases her teaching on what she regards to be each student's blank slate (which must sometimes be cleared). This pedagogical physics is shaped by each teacher's conception of the role of music-making, the goals of music education, and understandings about the nature of ability

¹⁰³ "Twinkle" and "Lightly Row" are the first two pieces included in the Suzuki method, which she is critiquing here, despite her support of Suzuki's mother tongue philosophy.

¹⁰⁴ As a highly experienced teacher who adopted the O'Connor method in large part because she saw possibilities for a logical and engaging sequence of teaching points, which she calls "lessons," Wiley has authored a book to help new teachers in the method, which she adapted from her years teaching new teachers in the method.

development. In the following section, I look more closely at Cole’s and Wiley’s teaching contexts via a discussion of the first piece in each method book, vignettes of which were introduced in the chapter’s opening paragraphs. These first pieces serve as an opportunity to examine the relationship between the intentions of the methods’ founders and the lived application of these methods by two women with many decades of experience.¹⁰⁵

The First Song

Tens of thousands of violin students around the United States share a common formative experience: the first piece they learned to perform on the instrument was a series of rhythmic variations on “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”¹⁰⁶ But since 2009, an increasing number of beginner violinists (though nowhere close to the population of “twinklers”) have trained their bodies to perform a different first set of notes, instead: those to the American folk tune “Boil ’Em Cabbage Down.” The technical requirements of each song actively shape the way young players approach the violin; moreover, the ways Cole and Wiley teach these songs make statements about which technical and musical knowledge is most fundamental, which skills should be taught explicitly and which left unmentioned (temporarily or otherwise), how to approach a new piece of repertoire (as sound, as musical notation, as a game, as part of a culturally and historically bounded practice), and, importantly, how to practice and approach the learning process.

When asked why he selected “Twinkle” as the first piece in his method book, Suzuki explained that children from any number of cultural backgrounds would already know how to sing

¹⁰⁵ Where to discuss the very gendered dynamics—not just of this context, but of music education and Suzuki parenting and mother figures and “niceness” and such?

¹⁰⁶ While the Suzuki Association of the Americas does not keep data on the number of students enrolled in Suzuki programs, they keep demographic information that includes the number of registered teachers, from which I have estimated the number of enrolled violin students to be somewhere between 20 and 60 thousand. See “Demographics,” Suzuki Association of the Americas, accessed August 23, 2017, <https://suzukiassociation.org/about/stats/>.

it, as it was “probably the best-known song universally. Every child knows it in his own language.”¹⁰⁷ This sense of familiarity is connected to one of the basic tenets of Suzuki’s mother tongue approach, discussed above. Instead of introducing the legato theme of “Twinkle” as the first entry in Book 1, Suzuki composed a set of rhythmic variations (Figure 4.4) more appropriate for a beginner’s bow stroke than the long, slow bows of the original melody; such long, connected strokes require a more proficient and flexible bow hold to play with a beautiful tone, which Suzuki hoped to cultivate from the very beginning of a student’s playing experience.¹⁰⁸ The variation rhythms were also chosen with familiarity and fluency in mind; Suzuki adapted Variation A (Figure 4.4), for example, from the opening of Bach’s popular *Concerto for Two Violins* (included in Book 4 and Book 5 of the method). Each of the rhythms was idiomatic of the Baroque style, the repertoire of which was increasingly relevant to the string-playing world in the West and Japan alike as Suzuki was developing his method over the course of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁹

To Suzuki, the melody of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” was not inherently significant in itself, though the song’s note order is conducive to teaching students a balanced left hand position. Rather, the well-known song provided an opportunity to cultivate a particular approach to learning music as a language—a process that starts from the earliest age and involves constant repetition and parental involvement. Suzuki believed that all students immersed in the sounds and the motions of “Twinkle” would eventually develop the ability to play it with ease.

¹⁰⁷ Alfred Garson, *Suzuki Twinkles: An Intimate Portrait* (Alfred Music, 2001), 81. The song, originally entitled “Ah! Vous Dirai-Je, Maman” is the first divertissement champêtre in M. Boüin’s *Les Amusements d’une Heure et Demy*, published in 1761; it was popularized when W.A. Mozart composed a theme and variations on the melody for piano in 1781. The melody has since appeared in compositions by myriad other Western art music composers, in folk traditions around the world, in nursery rhymes, and elsewhere. In the majority of cases, it is a song associated with children.

¹⁰⁸ Garson, *Suzuki Twinkles*.

¹⁰⁹ Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*.

Figure 4.4 consists of two musical score boxes. The left box, titled "Variation A", shows six staves of music in A major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The notation features a repetitive rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with various fingerings (0, 1, 2, 3) indicated above the notes. The right box, titled "Boil 'em Cabbage Down (Variation 1)", is from "Book 1" and is an "American Folk Song" arranged by Mark O'Connor. It is marked "Energetically" with a tempo of 160. The score includes guitar-specific notation such as "A" and "E7" chords and fret numbers (1, 2, 3) above the notes. The key signature is A major and the time signature is 4/4.

Figure 4.4: The first variations presented in the Suzuki and O'Connor method books, respectively.

Figure 4.5 is divided into two main sections. The left section is a 3x2 grid of musical examples. The top row shows two eighth-note patterns. The middle row shows two eighth-note patterns, the second with a triplet of eighth notes. The bottom row shows two eighth-note patterns, the second being a simple eighth-note scale. The right section is a larger musical score titled "Slow Tempo: Play the open 'A' string." It features three examples (Ex. 1, Ex. 2, Ex. 3) of eighth-note patterns in A major. Each example includes guitar-specific notation: "0" for the open string, "V" for vibrato, and "V" for vibrato. The key signature is A major and the time signature is 4/4.

Figure 4.5: Twinkle variations A, B, C, D, E, and Theme; first three variations in O'Connor's Book 1.

Though O'Connor mentions an entirely different set of goals for his repertoire choice, the similarities between the first songs in the Suzuki and O'Connor method books are worth noting. "Cabbage," like "Twinkle," is a well-known folk tune with stepwise fingerings in A Major that involves a significant amount of repetition, structurally and rhythmically—not to mention that it introduces the same first rhythmic pattern as Suzuki's Variation A (see Figures 4.4 and 4.5). With a characteristic dose of antagonism, however, O'Connor argues that "Cabbage" "is a much, much better starting tune" than "Twinkle" in part because it "allows for technical acquisition and creativity

to take place at the same time.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, the two founders’ different understandings of creativity are evident in the way they advocate students to approach these first songs. O’Connor conceives creativity in terms of improvisation and individual personal expression, whereas Suzuki ascribed to a more traditionally Japanese understanding of creativity, which involves a certain richness of inner experience (rather than outer variation) acquired through extensive repetitive and imitative practices.¹¹¹ O’Connor’s favorite example to demonstrate the merit of “Cabbage” as a first song was the performance described at the start of this chapter (which was played for teacher trainees at the New York summer camps I attended): a technically showy, improvisation-dominated jazz rendition which was enthusiastically received by the audience. Contrastingly, Suzuki’s preferred promotional material (included on the covers of many editions of his books) for “Twinkle” was an image of thousands of students standing on stage performing the piece with ease and joy, in perfect unison.

Wiley has elaborated upon O’Connor’s argument about the advantages of introducing students to the violin through “Cabbage” over many other common beginner songs. As she has written, “Not only is this beginning tune a great little melody for teaching whole and half steps from a home base central to the hand (C# on the violin), but the melody is also an obvious chord progression. The initial move from C# to D carries such an obvious chord change with it that the students sense harmonic movement from the very beginning.” Indeed, Wiley sees “Cabbage” as a fitting introduction to one of her missions as an O’Connor method teacher, which she calls “the Three M Principle: Music is More than Melody.” Instead of focusing on the perfect execution of the song’s melodic notes, Wiley uses “Cabbage” as an opportunity to discuss rhythmic subtleties, bowing feels, harmonic progressions, different aspects of music ensembles, and ear training (of

¹¹⁰ “TWINKLE, TWINKLE, LITTLE CABBAGE,” accessed August 24, 2017, <http://markoconnorblog.blogspot.com/2012/07/twinkle-twinkle-little-cabbage.html>.

¹¹¹ Sefton-Green et al., *The Routledge International Handbook of Creative Learning*, 46; Robert J. Sternberg, *Handbook of Creativity* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 340.

aspects beyond melody). As the following section demonstrates, Wiley prioritizes introducing her students to these more inclusive musical principles, allowing them to hold their instrument in a wider variety of ways to begin participating in the process of music making.¹¹²

Students' first experience with "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" is vastly different in Ronda Cole's studio. Before attending their first private lessons, Cole requires new students and their designated "practice parents" to observe hours of private and group lessons and develop the habit of regularly listening to the Suzuki Book 1 recording on a daily basis. This type of preparation initiates students and parents into a series of studio norms they will be expected to follow once they start lessons.¹¹³ As Cole explained of this introductory process,

And so my process now is that they have to observe for at least three months. They're observing lessons, they're mostly observing group classes, and in the last month they go to individual lessons. And the parent is getting the education of, wow, we're not just playing little tunes and goofing around, this is really an educational opportunity. A broadening one. And in the mean-time the child is getting very very eager—why can't I have a violin, why can't I have a lesson with the teacher, why not me? So, I've got a parent where they belong and a child where they belong.

During this extensive preparatory period, the prospective family sees current practice parents taking detailed notes on every aspect of each lesson in order to repeat the tasks in their entirety at home each day, asking detailed questions if they are unsure about a particular task or goal; they see that no students show up a week after their previous lesson without having listened and practiced essentially every day; they discover that it is not unusual for students and parents in Cole's studio to have

¹¹² This moment is one of many examples of the fact that both of these experienced teachers agree on many points (Cole would likely acknowledge that music is more than melody and teaches her students how to listen and play accordingly), but how they prioritize and emphasize these points in their teaching—how early they introduce certain ideas, how often they focus on certain principles over others—is nevertheless significant.

¹¹³ Cole's observation requirement also completes a certain self-selection process within her studio population—relating to issues of socioeconomic and cultural privilege addressed elsewhere in this chapter. Indeed, part of the reason that Cole is able to uphold so many rigorous tenets of Suzuki's approach (which is foreign and inexplicable to most families before they enroll) is because she has the financial ability to uphold these norms regardless of how many families choose not to continue, and because enough families are willing to undergo a rigorous ideological makeover because they have witnessed the success of the other students who have studied with her.

carefully repeated a particular motion, set of notes, or other assignment hundreds of times in the course of their week of practice. It should be noted, too, that while Cole prides herself on the fact that very few students in her studio have quit playing the violin, this introductory period also serves to intercept families who, for whatever reasons, are not prepared to invest the time and attention (not to mention financial resources) that Cole requires.¹¹⁴

Once new students finally pick up their violins to begin the process of playing “Twinkle,” it is a highly controlled process that results in only a bowed note after weeks of preparation—preparation that is as rigorous as it sounds, but nevertheless full of playful challenges, jokes, and small celebrations that help the young student maintain a feeling of success after mastering each small task. In these first lessons, the parents and teacher focus on helping the student remember the exact placement of their feet, the angles of their knees and spine, the precise position and movements of the joints in their right arm to the rhythms. In short, though Cole certainly customizes her teaching to the learning styles and needs of each student, each student’s eventual ability to perform the Twinkle variations is held to a similar standard, aside perhaps from the way the violin is fit to a student’s body with sponges and rubber bands. No matter how long it takes (some students work on Twinkle for years before being deemed ready to “graduate” and move onto the second song of Book 1), every member of Cole’s studio plays the piece with a similar level of polish, playing in nearly perfect unison in the studio’s regular group recitals.

A student learning “Boil ’Em Cabbage Down” with Pamela Wiley encounters an entirely different set of goals and expectations. Wiley has developed techniques to help her new students produce the song’s melodic contours as immediately as possible, resulting in a wide range of postures and sounds. Some students achieve a relatively in-tune and rhythmically accurate rendition

¹¹⁴ For a standard 30-minute beginner lesson, Cole charges around \$70. Wiley’s rate varies depending on the financial resources of her students’ families, charging \$30 at most for a 30-minute lesson.

of the song, and others move on to subsequent songs in the book without correcting every technical or musical aspect that Cole might deem not ready yet.¹¹⁵ Rather than prioritizing a standard of Western classical technical proficiency over broader musical understandings, Wiley aims for her students to engage with the Cabbage variations in a way that reproduces a more “organic” or “traditional” communal process of music-making. In other words, Wiley hopes to cultivate the desire to achieve technical ease and efficiency through trial and error, through what she has described as a “rise to the occasion” approach. Through this more hands-off process (relative to Cole’s), some students are quickly able to absorb a significant number of skills, techniques, and elements of an effective playing posture; others do not pick up as many details and continue to play at a more basic level until explicitly instructed. From the very beginning, Wiley’s students are encouraged to learn through improvisation, experimentation, and exploration—on their own, but especially in group settings—regardless of how they are holding their violins or bows.

I first encountered the “Boil ’Em Cabbage Down” video described at the start of this chapter in the 2015 teacher certification course for O’Connor’s method in New York City; our instructor, Pattie Hopkins Kinlaw, presented the video as an example of the method’s flexibility. O’Connor posted this video on his Facebook page as a testament to the inspirational potential of the song. “See how far we can take the tune and see how the French jazz audience reacts to it,” he wrote in the post. “Folks, you wouldn’t be getting this kind of response no matter how well we improvised on Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star - and the children can feel the power of their little beginning tune and the difference it makes.”¹¹⁶ Pamela Wiley has emphasized how the pedagogical possibilities of “Cabbage” are not simply imposed upon the song because it was chosen as the first tune in the method; rather, its American cultural context as an orally transmitted folk tune without a

¹¹⁵ Field notes, O’Connor method teacher training at Turtle Bay Music School, New York City, July 30, 2015.

¹¹⁶ “Mark O’Connor - Posts,” accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/markoconnorfanpage/posts/10152109106701140>.

fundamental attachment to the *Werktreue* ideal is inherently designed for a range of ability levels and a range of interpretations. And while the method intentionally incorporates music associated with a variety of performance practices (including compositions from American composers of Western art music) Wiley notes that this diversity and flexibility is one of the method's great assets. As she explained, "American music is the best music for learning, for teaching, because it's so adaptable to any level. I mean, Mozart didn't write any beginning tunes. And Brahms and Tchaikovsky. But Cabbage can exist on this level or this level or this level. It's supposed to. You're supposed to change it. And you're not supposed to change Bach."¹¹⁷

The inherent flexibility of the O'Connor method's repertoire grants each student significant freedoms during the process of learning. What O'Connor teachers like Wiley identify as each student's level of "talent" or "giftedness," then, emerges in part from each student's unique response to these freedoms. In contrast, all of Cole's Suzuki students are held to a matching set of standards (regarding learning attitudes, technical skills, practice routines, and otherwise) that complement the rigidity and uniformity of the method's *Werktreue*-compliant repertoire. Within this Suzuki-oriented paradigm, differences in natural abilities present only as longer or shorter amounts of time mastering each step; Cole takes it upon herself to enable each student to perform Twinkle, and every subsequent piece, with a precisely calibrated posture, accurate intonation, a clear tone, and expressive dynamics—the level of technical ease a professional classical violinist would need to succeed, regardless of whether her students choose that career path.

In the following sections, I examine these beginning stages of each teacher's approach in greater detail through a close analysis of videos that chronicle two lessons: the first with Ronda Cole's student Eliza (5 years old) and the second with Pam Wiley's student Zoe (12 years old).¹¹⁸ My

¹¹⁷ Interview with Pamela Wiley, April 22, 2018.

¹¹⁸ As I discuss further below, this age difference is not merely a result of a lopsided presentation of data, but is representative of the teachers' differing policies on beginners; these students' different ages are part of an iterative

analysis of the music and the talk contained in each lesson unfolds as a narrative account, following Erickson and others. In the course of these lessons, both girls will play their first notes on the violin. While Zoe played this note in a matter of minutes after she and her parents met Wiley, Eliza had almost reached the end of her second lesson, after months of preparatory observations, parent preparation, and at-home listening.¹¹⁹

Eliza

Like all beginner lessons in Cole's studio, Eliza's second lesson began with the sound of the student's voice followed by an A-440 emanating from the tuner-metronome sitting by the teacher's chair. Like all of Cole's beginners, Eliza is asked to sing A before hearing the reference note, a daily practice that results in close to 100% of Cole's students developing a sense of perfect pitch—one of the most common signifiers associated with innate talent.¹²⁰ After starting out slightly sharp, Eliza adjusts her voice to reach an A, smiling while she sings as Cole turns on the tuner and shouts "Hurray!" to celebrate her success at this task. As Cole reminds the 5-year-old, singing A had been the first part of her homework, and she had accomplished it.

The next task in Eliza's lesson would not become a regular occurrence, though it affects every subsequent moment of her time in Cole's studio.¹²¹ Leaving her chair, Cole takes a poster-

process of policy and pedagogy, as Wiley has inevitably developed different ways of teaching beginning songs through her experiences with a wider range of student ages.

¹¹⁹ Ronda Cole noted in a personal email that Eliza is one of several younger siblings of current students whom she recently started teaching. Because of their experiences watching and listening along with their older siblings, Cole joked that they "seemed to begin at lesson five." In other words, it is in fact quite unusual that Eliza accomplished an acceptable bow hold and played her first note in her second lesson; it often takes more than a month of lessons and practicing following the observation period for Cole's beginner students to put bow to string on their own.

¹²⁰ All of Cole's students I personally observed in lessons had developed this ability. For further discussion of the ways absolute pitch is much more constructed and much less absolute than previously thought, see Hedger, Heald, and Nusbaum, "Absolute Pitch May Not Be So Absolute."

¹²¹ While this lesson provides an opportunity to examine the establishment of certain skills, norms, and expectations, it does not make apparent the highly systematic nature of the vast majority of Cole's lessons. Usually after tuning, Cole's students (even those still working on Twinkle) proceed to recite a poem they have memorized and practiced for expression and ease; they relay to her the composer, performer, and title of a piece they studied for their "special listening" that week; students a bit further on in Book 1 add in a "by ear tune" that they chose to learn from listening alone. These sections of the lessons are then followed by items such as scales, etudes, tonalizations (an arpeggiated

board Eliza’s mother, Lindsay, had purchased and helps Eliza make a foot chart (Figure 4.6). With the girl’s assistance—helping her gain an attachment to and responsibility for the chart she will use for her first months of lessons—Cole traces the student’s feet in their “resting” (red) and “playing” (green) positions, as well as making an outline of her violin to visualize the angle at which she will tuck it under her right arm when she is not playing. “Okay there’s your red and green. And I kind of like that there because the resting position is when the feet are in the red.”



*Figure 4.6: Making a foot chart.
Still from video made available to author*



*Figure 4.7: Eliza’s first note using bow and violin.
Still from video made available to author*

On the other edge of the chart, Cole outlines the toes of her own feet as well, not only symbolizing her intimate involvement in these first literal and figurative steps of Eliza’s playing experience, but also establishing the proximity and angle at which the girl will stand in front of her from that point onwards. This proximity allows Cole to reach out and adjust Eliza’s feet and knee

melody Suzuki composed to focus on ringing tones on the instrument), rhythm exercises, performances of already-learned repertoire, and work on new pieces.

joints, the angle of her hips, shoulders, and head, and, later, her bow hold and violin position, helping her both feel and contemplate the angles and sensations of the standardized posture Cole has refined over the course of her teaching career. As she told Eliza, who looked on with her full attention while pulling at her dress in excitement, “this is *your* chart, but I’m kind of part of it.”

This six-minute foot chart event was not simply a procedural necessity. Rather, it pointed to the level of attention and time Cole devotes to honing her students’ posture from their very first moments in lessons. As with every aspect of Cole’s teaching, the chart provided Eliza with multimodal opportunities to internalize the lesson it conveyed: the positions of her feet were not only descriptively referred to as “resting” and “playing,” but were also color-coded, and carefully shaded in at home as a part of her practice; her feet were manually manipulated to match the chart by Cole and her mother, and Eliza would practice moving her feet on her own (while maintaining “soft,” unlocked knees) to the correct position repeatedly on a daily basis, until it becomes “easy” and entirely subconscious—seeming intuitive to an uninitiated observer. Although I first judged Cole’s foot chart ritual to be an arbitrarily fastidious detail that delayed students’ playing experience, over time I observed how this procedure epitomizes Cole’s ideology of talent. For Cole, proficient violin playing that appears and feels easy does not begin with sounds, or the violin or the bow, but with mindful attention to every angle of the body. By emphasizing the importance of her feet (and, as the remainder of the lesson illustrates, almost every other aspect of her posture) before Eliza attempts her first note, Cole ensures that the student’s body will become attuned and eventually habituated to the correct positions (rather than having to break “bad” habits later), and that her first attempts to produce a sound will be successful.¹²²

¹²² This intentional habituation of the student’s foot placement is just one example of the many ways Cole shapes students’ “natural” states through habits—and, indeed, an intentional formation of their violin-related habitus. As Paul Connerton has put it, “Postures and movements which are habit memories become sedimented into bodily conformation. Actors can mimic the impressions, doctors can examine the results.” Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 94.

After positioning Eliza on her new chart, Cole launches quickly into the next segment of the lesson. “Very good, okay. What song am I doing?” Eliza had also prepared for this section of the lesson at home, and right as Cole finishes clapping the rhythm of the first Twinkle variation, Eliza smiles and declares, “Mississippi Hot Dog!” Another celebration of success. Rather than moving on to another rhythm, Cole builds upon this achievement, connecting the rhythmic sounds the student recognized with its embodied counterpart by asking her to clap the rhythm, too. They chant together while clapping, “Mississippi Hot Dog.” After two repetitions, Cole introduces another layer of musicality to the exercise by suggesting a different dynamic and the type of motion it requires, “Now do it small.” They clap and chant softly, “Mississippi Hot Dog.” After clapping a second, slightly more complicated rhythm, “Stop, big bow, stop, big bow,” Cole asks Eliza for a more complex type of movement, taking her right hand, prompting her to remember the important details of her home practice assignment:

Cole: Shake my hand with that one. Where do we start?
Eliza: Higher than-
Cole: Higher than your nose. And will your elbow be?
Eliza: Bent.
Cole: Okay. And the next thing we do is breathe, right?

They both take a deep breath and shake hands (enabling Cole, too, to sense if Eliza knows the rhythm, and to subtly correct and guide her hand if necessary) to the rhythm of Twinkle Variation C, plunging their joined hands from the level of Eliza’s nose to the level of her belly button.

Proceeding through the rhythms of other variations, Cole continually reminds Eliza not only to start the handshake rhythms above her nose and to bend her elbow as she moves, but to keep her right shoulder down and relaxed: “Did you know you could raise your arm without raising your shoulder? Watch me, watch me, look at my shoulder.” These are not insignificant kinesthetic tasks for a five-year-old to achieve, and as Eliza’s eyes begin to drift away from this confusing set of motions to look at the birds through the picture window, Cole immediately notices, raising the volume of her

voice and reminding the girl of another aspect of her assignment (there are big eyes drawn into the notebook beside Cole), telling Eliza to ask her eyes to maintain focus on the teacher: “Uh oh! Uh oh! Look at me!” Eliza smiles, acknowledging this agreement and meeting Cole’s eyes again.

In the course of this “Twinkle rhythms” section of the lesson, then, Eliza has already attended to the most difficult motions of the Twinkle variations. She has played the correct order of down-bow and up-bow strokes by starting above her nose and descending while shaking Cole’s hand; she has started to notice and control her gross and fine motor skills, relaxing her shoulder and bending her elbow while using a selective set of muscles to raise her wrist and forearm; she has started to develop the habit of breathing in anticipation of a musical phrase; with guidance, she has connected the words and rhythms of each Twinkle variation with these complex arm movements. Although Eliza has yet to touch her violin nearly halfway through her lesson, her time spent practicing these preparatory steps ensures that she will feel at ease and in control when she does pick up her instrument.

Signaling another transition, Cole reaches for Eliza’s violin: “Okay. Let’s put your violin up. Very nice.” She places the violin at the precise angle she had explained to Eliza and her mother the previous week—the same angle that her advanced students use to practice Paganini Caprices or Bach Preludes efficiently and painlessly for hours—guiding the girl’s left arm forward and placing her thumb on the violin’s neck. “Shoulders are always sleeping, right? Your mind doesn’t sleep, just your shoulders, okay? What song?” Cole takes Eliza’s bow and plays “Mississippi Hot Dog,” generating the first violin sounds of the lesson. Eliza’s eyes light up in response to the clear sound on her small violin and she begins to smile, listening to the rhythm she already knows by heart.¹²³

¹²³ Cole maintains a close relationship with the violin shops in her area so that they understand her high standards for instruments. She requires all of her students to rent or purchase instruments that enable students to produce a clear and relatively effortless tone, regardless of their size. Many 1/4, 1/8, and 1/16 size violins are not built in a way that allow a clear sound, which Cole sees as inhibiting the child’s ability to develop sensitivity in their technique as well as their ear from the first moments.

After identifying all of the Twinkle rhythms again in this manner, Cole takes Eliza’s tiny violin and plays it herself, prompting the girl to identify songs into the middle of Suzuki Book 1, as Eliza had been listening to the recording for months (in fact, even longer than that, as her older brother had already been studying with Cole). While Eliza correctly identifies the earlier songs in the book, she gets confused by the A major melodies of the songs “Allegro” and “Perpetual Motion.” Cole gives Eliza some information to attach to the melodies, imbuing the order of notes with additional meaning:

Cole: This is a piece that Dr. Suzuki wrote to make children happy. Does it work? Its name is Allegro. And Allegro in Italian—that's another language—means happy. Can you hear happy in this? [Plays the first four notes]

Eliza: Yeah!

Cole: It really feels happy doesn't it?

Eliza: Happy, Happy... [Singing the melody of “Allegro”]

Cole: [Singing along with Eliza’s melody] Happy, happy, look at me I'm happy. You could make up a song about that.

Eliza: [Smiling]

Following this conversation, Cole and Eliza discuss what “Perpetual Motion” means, as well, singing “tick tock tick tock tick tock” to the melody’s uniquely perpetual stream of eighth notes. In addition to helping Eliza develop an “inner song”—the ability to hear in one’s mind a quintessential, musically expressive rendition of the repertoire they will play before (and while) they perform it on their violins themselves—this activity and discussion introduces Eliza to the idea that every song was written by someone, and for a reason. In later lessons, Cole will begin requiring Eliza to pick one “special listening” piece each week, arriving at her lesson prepared to announce who composed it, who performed it, and what it was called, using correct pronunciation and projecting her voice—skills she will use when she announces her piece in performances. She will also be asked to remember the title and composer of every piece she learns to play.

The final section of Eliza’s lesson turns again to her bow hand, now incorporating the bow itself as well as adding the fine motor movements of her fingers to the gross motor movements she had practiced a few minutes earlier. Again, Cole presents the information in multiple modalities and styles, helping Eliza to feel and conceptualize the highly detailed instructions for holding the bow. Cole arranges Eliza’s hand on the bow, repeatedly noting the bump in her thumb, the relaxed feeling of her muscles, the spaces between her fingers, and the flatness of her knuckles; she tells the girl that she should be able to feel air blown through the spaces her fingers create on the bow, helping her feel and conceptualize the negative space. Cole blows onto Eliza’s fingers to help her test this theory. “Did it go through?” “Yeah.” Rather than giving these instructions once, Cole circles back around several times to each of these aspects of the bow hold, helping Eliza—as well as her mother, who is taking notes and occasionally offering Eliza additional reminders as she looks on—practice the type of patience, diligence, and care she will need to repeat this activity every day at home. Seeing that Eliza has not quite internalized the required thumb bump (and after a few minutes spent trimming her thumb nail to enable it to touch the bow at the correct place), Cole adds a layer of personification to the process. Eliza’s mother, Lindsay, is standing close-by throughout, taking notes on the interaction:

Cole: Uh oh, still a bump though. [Modulating her voice higher, and meeting Eliza’s eyes just a few inches away from her face] This is pretty tricky to teach your thumb to do that. But you’ll be a really persistent teacher. Keep telling it, and tell it again, and tell it again, and keep telling it until it remembers, okay?

Eliza: Okay.

Cole: Hey thumb! Be soft and bent! Soft and bent, soft and bent. We should make a twinkle variation out of soft and bent, huh?

Eliza: [Nods and smiles]

Lindsay: (laughs)

Cole: Alright. Well, okay. I want you to make that bow hold so many times a day nobody would believe it. So many. So if you can get that, spaces and soft thumb, we might even play a few notes.

With this added motivation, combined with the time spent cultivating the mindful attention required to control the automatic response of her thumb joint, Eliza maintains a correct bow hold and Cole decides to reward her by putting bow to string. Placing the violin on Eliza's shoulder, Cole places her hand on the bow, as well, guiding her as they produce the rhythm of "Mississippi Hot Dog." The violin's sound is clear, and Eliza's face immediately explodes into a smile (Figure 4.7).

Cole: Whoa! Your first note!
Lindsay: You just played the violin!
Cole: What a nice sound! I like it!
Lindsay: Wow!

Everyone in the room—even the cat that had been walking in and out of the camera's view—stopped to celebrate this long-awaited moment. After repeating the motions of "Mississippi Hot Dog" a few times with Eliza's bow hold still carefully positioned with a bent thumb, Cole takes her hand off of the bow for a few seconds. Seizing this rare moment of freedom, the five-year-old manages to saw her bow excitedly across the A and E strings about four times before Cole reclaims control, lightly scolding, "hey, hey, hey!" Eliza's mother Lindsay, understanding Cole's intentions, explains to Eliza, "You don't play unless your form is right."

After discussing exactly how Eliza and Lindsay will practice the skills covered in this lesson at home every day, Cole directs the student's attention back to the foot chart she had been standing on since the start of the lesson: "Now we can take our thank you bow. And you will be on your red feet. Next week your mom will finish your chart, and you will be sure to know which ones are red." Eliza, who had already learned what to say with each lesson's concluding bow, looked up at Cole and said, "thank you for teaching me, Mrs. Cole." Bowing as a marker of respect to the teacher and the audience is one of the most consistently maintained of Suzuki's rituals in contemporary Suzuki studios. In addition to marking the beginning and end of each lesson and performance, the practice of bowing symbolizes the amount of authority and respect granted to teachers like Cole—not a

given in modern American cultural contexts that often categorize music teachers with childcare providers, tutors, or hired entertainers.¹²⁴

Although this lesson illustrates the many ways that Cole establishes behavioral and technical fundamentals with new students (fundamentals which later appear to onlookers as natural or innate to these students), it is remarkable how many expectations and behaviors had already been normalized, standardized, and made implicit before this second lesson began. In part because Lindsay has become familiar with Cole's expectations through practicing with Eliza's older brother, she already understands the level of detail she needs to note in each lesson (which is why she appears consistently in the corner of the video, watching Cole's interactions with her daughter).¹²⁵ She has also learned the vital importance of asking questions if any aspect is ambiguous, so Eliza does not practice something incorrectly dozens or hundreds of times between lessons. If viewed out of context, too, Eliza's behavior in this lesson may be perceived by an onlooker as unusually calm and cooperative; but her months of observation of the culture lived by other young violinists in the school, combined with the type of environment her parents have fostered around violin playing, has likely cultivated a sense of significance around the instrument, rather than seeing it as a playful activity or an entertaining side-project. Indeed, even Eliza's palpable enthusiasm for being able to

¹²⁴ Cole often discusses the way she intentionally shapes her self-presentation to dissuade students and parents from perceiving her as a "nice" teacher that falls into this category. For instance, she told an anecdote about looking for new glasses: "I said I'm a violin teacher. She said, you don't want to look sweet? I said, I love my students very much and I need them to look at me and know that what's coming out of my mouth is important, so I don't want pink glasses. I want my look to be strong." For a discussion of "niceness" as it operates, see Joseph Wegwert and Aiden Charles, "Niceness and the Reproduction of Inequity: The Perfect Storm of Whiteness, Middle-Classness, and Cis-Femaleness in School Contexts," in *A Culture of Nice: How Educators' Niceness Holds Inequities in Place* (American Educational Research Association, New York City, 2018). As Wegwert notes in a statement that extends to the context of many young Suzuki training sessions I have observed, "the gendered, raced, and economic locations of most teacher candidates, teachers, and teacher educators [as white, middle-class, cis-female] position them to avoid conflict, eschew controversy, proclaim neutrality and, consequently, reproduce dominant hierarchies and discourses of power."

¹²⁵ In teaching the parents of her students exactly how to speak to and practice with their children as the "home teacher," Cole is supplanting the usual, more "naturally" occurring phenomenon of parents reproducing their social and cultural norms in the ways they are (or are not) involved with their children's progress. For one discussion of how parental involvement is often key to a student's early musical pathway, see Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 308–11.

sing the Suzuki songs and produce the first sounds on the violin cannot be attributed largely to some innate desire, as that desire has been carefully cultivated. As Suzuki wrote, “We have caused [the student] to acquire that desire.”¹²⁶ It is a phrase of Suzuki’s that Cole refers to often.

Zoe

A few weeks before Zoe’s first lesson took place, her family had contacted Wiley after reading an article about her Jacksonboro fiddle club in a local newspaper. At the time of this lesson, the student was eleven years old, six years older than Eliza was when she formally began lessons.¹²⁷ While this lesson offers a wealth of information about Wiley’s approach and philosophy as a teacher, no single lesson she teaches might be considered “typical” in the same way as the highly standardized lesson formats of Ronda Cole.¹²⁸ Zoe’s lesson took place at Wiley’s home in Jacksonboro in what is usually her dining room and it lasted for the better part of an hour, the teacher taking her time to explain certain aspects of the instrument and become more familiar with the family, whom she had never met.¹²⁹ Before Zoe and both of her parents arrived, Wiley had laid out violins of every size that she had acquired for her free local fiddle club, not knowing what size instrument Zoe would require, or whether she would have been able to rent or purchase one before arriving. In other words, she neither knew the family’s expectations about or goals for this first lesson, nor did she convey hers beforehand. The first few moments of this lesson, then, involved discussion of logistics (“let me get a shoulder rest on here”) and introductory conversations (“So does anybody in your school play violin?”). After these introductions, which lasted no more than

¹²⁶ Suzuki and Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*, 95.

¹²⁷ As discussed previously, Eliza had been learning informally for even longer through observing her brother’s violin learning.

¹²⁸ This is true both of the content and location of the lesson, but also the socioeconomic status and racial identity of the students and parents.

¹²⁹ Whereas I was not present at Eliza’s lesson, I was observing in the corner of the room for Zoe’s. Beforehand, I had helped Wiley re-arrange the table and chairs to make space for Zoe’s lesson, as well as the meeting of the fiddle club that would be happening afterwards in the same space. As the fiddle club is no longer able to use the space pictured in Figure 4.3, Wiley has allowed it to continue meeting by offering her home as a gathering place.

one minute on the hour-long video, Wiley takes both the violin and the bow without further ceremony and places them in Zoe's hands:

Wiley: Stand up and, I'm just gonna put this on your shoulder, like that. And have you put your arm out here to see if it's the right.... Just straight out. Yeah, that's a good size for you to start out. And then just put your hand here. And then just turn your head out this way.

Zoe: This way?

Wiley: Yeah, just so you're looking down here. Okay? And what I'm gonna do is put the bow there and put your, just put your hand on it like just drape your hand, your fingers on it. Just like, like this. Not, not grabbing it but just, that's right. And then put the thumb underneath. Go this way. Yeah. And you just spread them out. I just wanna show you what, how it works first and then I'm gonna teach you how to do it.

Following these explanatory words and a few guiding motions, Wiley prompts Zoe to begin moving her bow back and forth, helping her create her first notes on the violin. The student, who has been reserved until this point in the lesson, begins to smile in response to the sound.¹³⁰ With these minimal playing instructions, which gave Zoe just enough information to make a consistent sound on the A string, Wiley takes her own left hand and starts playing the notes of “Boil 'Em Cabbage Down,” instructing Zoe to continue moving her bow back and forth (Figure 4.8). The student's first notes, then, occur within her first few minutes after meeting Pamela Wiley, and take the form not only of a few strokes on an open string (typical of the Suzuki and many other methods' approach to students' first sounds) but the entirety of the first tune in the O'Connor method book.

After presenting this basic set of motions, Wiley dedicates the remainder of the lesson to refining Zoe's ability to play this set of notes. Regardless of whether Wiley had explicitly planned or intuitively maneuvered the structure of the lesson, she offers the subsequent teaching points in sections of equal length, about six minutes each, with intermissions for discussion and to search for various objects she needs for the lesson (rosin, the O'Connor book and CD, her violin, and her

¹³⁰ While my presence likely had some impact on Zoe's shyness, the middle school student was also meeting Wiley for the first time, in a new space, so the cause of her shyness was overdetermined. In other words, there was no “normal” dynamic between Zoe and Wiley during this first encounter that I might have disrupted.

guitar). These remaining sections of the lesson proceed as follows: Wiley explains the theory behind string instrument sound production and the technique of violin playing; she helps Zoe begin using her own left hand to play the notes of “Cabbage”; she addresses the bow hand in more detail; and, toward the end of the lesson, she encourages the new student to put all of these new skills together at once, accompanying her on the guitar as she plays “Cabbage” without any assistance.



*Figure 4.8: Zoe's first notes (bow hand).
Photo taken by author*



*Figure 4.9: Zoe's first notes (violin hand).
Photo taken by author*

Although Wiley had taught beginner Suzuki students using an approach similar to Cole's during her decades as a Suzuki teacher, as an O'Connor teacher she intentionally shows Zoe “how it works first” before instructing her more specifically “how to do it.” This order of operations, beginning with musical sounds and concepts, and working back to gradually refine techniques later on, contrasts starkly with Cole's approach—Wiley's process perhaps being more like blocking out an image in an oil painting with a large brush, or chipping away at a piece of marble, instead of meticulously rendering the transparent and immutable shapes of a watercolor painting one layer at a

time, as Cole does when she systematically “sets up” her beginners. As Wiley commented at one point in the lesson (a comparison fully supported by the analysis of Eliza’s lesson above): “Some [teaching] methods spend a whole lot of time on how to hold the violin, and how to hold the bow, and how to just play an open, you know, I don't know. Seems pretty boring to me. [laughs] So I give the kids more credit than that. I think they can really play from the very beginning.” In Zoe’s case, this order of musical learning—moving from general musical concepts to specific skills—has also been facilitated in part by her later developmental stage and set of life experiences, which constitute anything other than a blank slate in terms of her musical involvement as well as more general attributes, like her personality and attitudes toward the learning process.¹³¹ As Wiley is not concerned with cultivating or treating her students as though they were blank slates, however, she does not require her beginners to start lessons at any particular age, accepting adults as well as children of a range of ages who are interested in learning, adjusting the way she teaches accordingly. In this sense, the seemingly asymmetrical comparison between Cole’s lesson with Eliza and Wiley’s lesson with Zoe is representative of their respective attitudes toward beginners.

After repeating this introductory bowing activity again with the notes of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” and asking Zoe to adjust her bowing rhythms to the lengths of the song’s recognizable melody—to “figure it out”—Wiley devotes the subsequent six minutes of the lesson to explaining the physics of playing the violin and the theory of the notes it produces. Explaining the role of the left hand in creating different notes by placing her finger onto the string while Zoe holds the violin, Wiley demonstrates the principle of higher and lower notes according to shorter and longer vibrating material: “if I drop my finger onto the string here, now that's the end of the string.

¹³¹ With students at an earlier developmental stage, teachers cannot expect them to “figure out” as much without guidance, so if Zoe had been six years old, Wiley would likely have given her instructions in simpler and smaller steps. Her general approach, however, is the same. As she noted after Zoe had played through “Cabbage” without physical assistance from Wiley, most of her students are able to play the song in some form by the end of their first lesson.

[Moving her finger further up the fingerboard each time] So now it's gonna make a higher note. And now it's gonna make a higher note. And now higher one. And a higher one.” After learning that Zoe already plays the piano, Wiley proceeds to describe the specific notes and steps included in Cabbage, commenting, “This is gonna be so easy. [laughter] You’ll be my genius beginner.” Although she clearly did not intend this comment literally, describing to me in a subsequent interview how she does not tell her students whether she thinks they are talented, this friendly aside is one example of Wiley’s response to the vastly different abilities and perceived aptitudes of her students. In joking about Zoe being a “genius beginner,” Wiley is likely commenting about the speed at which Zoe will learn and signaling that she will adjust her instruction so that it is appropriate for her.¹³²

In the following segment of the lesson, Wiley addresses the technique of Zoe’s left (violin) hand for the first time (Figure 4.9). With an equally concise set of instructions, she helps the student begin making a sound within seconds: “So just make that little shelf there, right. And then put the hand behind here. And it’s your middle finger that will come down to this [pointing at a tape she had just added to designate the finger’s placement for C#]. And what you wanna aim for is this side of the finger.” In her instructions to Zoe, Wiley does not command, but rather explains and justifies, equipping her with a holistic set of tools to understand how violin playing generally works, empowering her to incorporate her own analysis and creative problem-solving later on. Importantly, this approach aligns with Wiley’s attitude about musical ability development and her role as a teacher in that development: each student is comprised of a unique set of aptitudes, pre-existing skills, desires, musical preferences, and longer-term goals. In recognizing and celebrating these unique starting points and aptitudes, Wiley presents a broad swath of information and watches how quickly the student responds, what sparks her interest, how she approaches problems, and how much she is

¹³² As Chapter 1 has discussed, this meaning of musical talent as speed of learning is particularly prevalent in pedagogical contexts.

able to remember. Acknowledging (perhaps because I was in the room) that she was only roughly sketching out the complex technique for Zoe, Wiley comments, “I’m gonna back up and do some other stuff about how to hold the violin, the bow. But I just really wanna get you playing first.” Walking Zoe’s left hand through the process of placing her fingers for each note of “Cabbage,” the student plays the full melody for the first time on her own with both hands.

In the following section of the lesson, Wiley turns back to the technique of holding the bow in more detail in order to help the student *understand* the general principles of producing a sound; in contrast, Cole had instructed Eliza to *execute* a correct bow hold, allowing no room for errors in her (or her mother’s) interpretation of the instructions or for further experimentation. Rather than presenting Zoe with absolute pronouncements about the “correct” way to arrange her fingers, knuckles, wrist, and elbow, then, Wiley contextualizes and justifies her directives, implicitly granting the student agency and authority as a musician to make an informed decision about how to hold the bow in response to the information she is given. While this level of agency is partly a function of Zoe’s age, Wiley’s general technique of encouraging self-discovery was consistent throughout all of the lessons I observed her teach. Picking up her own violin in order to demonstrate, she explains the bent position of the right thumb (typically a difficult skill for students to master):

So this thing about having the thumb bent. You can play like that [making a straight, rigid thumb] and it works to a certain extent. But the bow slips around a lot when you do this [demonstrates bow slipping from bridge to fingerboard]. When you have your thumb like this, it kind of, um, it kind of slips around. And then you have to kind of push on it to keep it from slipping and then you get kind of a funny sound like that [makes crunching sound]. If your thumb is bent like this, it turns on a set, a certain set of muscles in your arm that work better.

Following these instructions, Wiley transitions with a casual summary of the skill she had just explained (“alright, that’s the bow hold. Now that you know how to do that, you can do it.”) to address the last major gap in Zoe’s new knowledge. The student had been sitting in a chair, as is the

norm of the lessons I observed, and Wiley asks her to stand in order to walk her through the placement of the violin on her left shoulder from resting position, singing a song that uses the melody of “Cabbage” she developed to help students remember each of the steps.

After helping Zoe move her violin from “resting position” to “playing position” so that she would be able to place the violin on her shoulder and apply the left- and right-hand skills she had just learned, Wiley turns briefly to the subject of home practice for the first time (now about halfway through the hour-long lesson). Acknowledging that Zoe had just been presented with a wealth of information, Wiley notes, “you don’t have to remember the song or anything,” but encourages her to practice as much as she can remember from what had been explained to her. While she clearly expects and encourages her students to practice, this level of emphasis on practicing is consistent with the other lessons I observed Wiley teach. As she commented to me, “I just have worn out on hassling kids to practice. So I pretty much just take what they do.”¹³³ Though she does provide guidance and instruction about what students could do at home in order to advance, this relatively *laissez faire* approach leads to different amounts and types of practice between her different students and their families, depending on parenting styles, educational goals, and levels of knowledge. This practice approach also results in some students—those who have already developed the type of analytical and retentive skills to process the complex skills Wiley presents—progressing more quickly from lesson to lesson.¹³⁴

Finally, after showing Zoe these basic components of violin playing, Wiley picks up her guitar and implicitly offers this new student the opportunity to play the tune entirely on her own. With a faint smile, Zoe complies, and Wiley’s guitar chords accompany the halting and timidly glassy

¹³³ This approach is consonant with Wiley’s overall acceptance of students’ and families’ differing levels of investment and goals in taking lessons—one which is more accepting of families that support “cultivation of natural growth.” Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*, 27–28.

¹³⁴ In other words, their talent presents as “speed” of learning, as discussed in Chapter 1.

sound that the student manages to produce on this first try without figurative training wheels. Zoe's bow hold and posture begin to break down upon their second repetition of the tune, with hardly any sound coming from the instrument in the final notes. After Zoe hesitates to play the tune through a third time, Wiley notices and inquires,

Wiley: So, um, what- wh- you're worried about something. What are you worried about?
Zoe: It doesn't sound right.

Rather than expressing concern, Wiley (who is always kind but does not frequently smile or laugh during lessons) laughs joyfully upon hearing Zoe's words—the most the student would utter at once in that lesson. Wiley springs into action to help Zoe solve the problem that she recognized through listening to the sound of her violin; she directs Zoe's awareness to bow direction, describes the physics of dropping fingers down onto the string, and helps her troubleshoot other reasons she might not be achieving a clear tone. This process of identifying and solving problems is fundamental to Wiley's teaching technique. Rather than building up every detail and habit with unwavering attention to detail, Wiley sketches out the general motions and the broader goals, subsequently helping her students “fix” any impediments and counterproductive habits (whether embodied or psychological) that emerge along the way. Rather than proscribing the most efficient series of steps from the start and requiring each student to master the required skills for each song before moving on to the next song in the book, Wiley encourages a process of self-discovery that celebrates each student's unique journey through the repertoire.¹³⁵ This approach resembles a more bottom-up strategy (starting with each student's individual case to reach a goal) than a top-down one (starting with a goal to address each student's individual case).¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Like Cole, Wiley has developed a detailed progression of teaching points oriented to the increasing technical and musical demands of each song in the method book series. She has taught this standardized progression in her teacher training courses and recently published in a teacher's manual: Pamela Wiley, *Violin Playing in the American Music System* (Pluff Mudd Publications, 2015).

¹³⁶ We discussed a number of dimensions of the metaphor of top-down and trickle-down teaching in our conversations. One reading of this imagery, she felt, reflected her goal “to make as much music-making as possible accessible to as many folks as possible from all parts of the society,” as she put it in an email correspondence following my week of

The remainder of Zoe’s lesson, which lasted about an hour, consisted of further problem-solving and skill-building around “Boil ’Em Cabbage Down.” In the last several minutes, Zoe’s parents tell Wiley a little more about their family’s interests in and involvement with music, and Wiley gives them information about lesson logistics and tuition prices. After telling Wiley that they pay about \$16 a week for Zoe’s piano lessons (Cole charges over ten times that for a 60-minute session with any non-member of her studio), Wiley describes a number of options they could choose according to how much they are able to pay and how far they are able to commute.¹³⁷ As she told the family near the end of the conversation, “I’m here for whatever you wanna do.”¹³⁸

Conclusion

In the above examinations of Eliza’s and Zoe’s lessons, earlier considerations of each teacher’s ideologies about musical talent shifted momentarily into the middle distance. It is important, then, to conclude this chapter (just one chapter of a much larger story) by drawing more explicit connections between these teachers’ methods and the way those methods’ ideologies were enacted in their teaching. If viewed through a particular lens, I argue, both Cole’s and Wiley’s beliefs about talent shine through on a macro level—in the sequences of events and the sets of skills they taught—but also on a more micro level, in nearly every moment of instruction.

Take the example of the teachers’ differing approaches to teaching a bow hold. Wiley helped Zoe to position her right hand on her bow in a matter of seconds (“put the thumb underneath. Go this way. Yeah. And you just spread [your fingers] out”), allowing the student immediately to enjoy producing a sound on her instrument. Cole, in contrast, concentrated on Eliza’s bow hold for the

observations. As Wiley joked, according to that rubric, she might be seen as the Bernie Sanders of teachers. “How fun to think of Ronda as the Ronald Reagan of the American Music System and me as the Bernie Sanders! Ha ha. I even think Ronda would understand and like that comparison.”

¹³⁷ Zoe’s family lives in Walterboro, about an hour from Wiley’s private violin studio location in Charleston and about half an hour from her home (and the meeting place of her free fiddle club) in Jacksonboro.

¹³⁸ As of this writing, Zoe has not yet had a second lesson with Wiley after this first introductory one, but her family expressed interest in signing up for further lessons sometime after the end of the school year.

majority of her lesson (which was, moreover, only one episode in a much longer sequence of steps that would transpire before Eliza would be permitted to play without physical guidance) using a multiplicity of teaching techniques—for instance, by isolating and fine-tuning the movements of the five-year-old’s elbow and shoulder through the hand-shaking game, or by blowing on her fingers to ensure that she was paying attention to (and would later remember) the sizes of the spaces between them.¹³⁹ Each teacher’s conception of talent permeated these respective teaching decisions. Cole’s dedication to Suzuki’s assertion that every child has talent, and that teachers are responsible for cultivating that talent, has motivated her to find ways to help all of her students master difficult skills like holding and manipulating a bow. Importantly, however, Cole understands that Eliza’s ability to consistently and effectively hold her bow requires a much broader set of abilities which are also her responsibility to teach: the young girl’s control over her own patience and attention (as we recall, even the direction of her gaze), her ability to articulately express her thoughts and questions, her awareness and control of the rest of her body, from her foot placement upwards (enabling the arm and hand to approach the bow using the correct set of muscles), and even her mother’s understanding of Cole’s teaching process, which allows her to replicate the activities at home until Eliza eventually internalizes the each lesson.

Wiley, conversely, believes each student possesses a unique set of interests and aptitudes that constitutes her talent—which, she readily acknowledges, are still profoundly influenced by a student’s teacher and other environmental factors. She sees her role, therefore, as that of a facilitator rather than a creator.¹⁴⁰ Wiley’s actions demonstrated that she did not intend to change Zoe’s

¹³⁹ This choice was not only entertaining for Eliza; it was also motivated by Cole’s continual knowledge of developmental stages and learning modalities. Throughout the course of the bow hold section of the lesson, Cole had Eliza sing,

¹⁴⁰ As Wiley put it to Zoe’s mother at the end of the lesson, “If you have a good teacher, that’s a leg up. If you have a pretty good instrument, that’s a leg up. If you’ve got some natural talent or you’re smart and take instructions well, which obviously [Zoe] does, um, then, you know, you’ve got an advantage. But there’s nothing that substitutes for time on the instrument.”

personality or her family's value systems about music or learning (an intention that some might attribute to Cole and the Suzuki approach), but rather to help the student achieve whatever level and type of musicality she and her family hope for her to achieve.

To approach the intersection between Cole's and Wiley's ideologies of talent and the details of their teaching from a different angle, we might turn to their differing use of language in these two lessons, shown in Figure 4.10. The bars represent the frequency of each word as used by each teacher in the lessons analyzed above, with Cole's dark grey bars on the left and Wiley's light grey bars on the right. It is interesting to note that, especially considering that Cole was teaching a significantly younger child, her vocabulary was more specific (for instance, where Wiley discussed "hands" Cole discussed "knuckles," "joints," and "fingertips,"), while also more limited and repetitive overall. Wiley's language was more informal, using words like "wanna" and "gonna," whereas Cole's was more formal, an aspect of her teaching technique that she explains to her teacher trainees, as she requires all of her students to speak in formal English—for instance, correcting students who say "yeah" and instructing them to say "yes," instead.¹⁴¹ This use of language represents Cole's highly socioeconomically specific mode of instruction, which aims to inculcate students into an upper-middle class mode of interlocution and self-presentation—not to mention musical taste and performance.

¹⁴¹ Indeed, music is often described as a language—both Suzuki and O'Connor present language-learning metaphors to support their ideologies of learning—but it is important to note that language itself, and the ways these teachers shape or adapt to the talk of their students and their families, is both highly classed and representative of their broader understandings about talent—musical and otherwise. As Jessi Streib has noted, students from upper-middle-class families "have larger vocabularies, speak more often, interrupt more, and feel more entitled to speak to teachers than their working-class counterparts." Jessi Streib, "Class Reproduction by Four Year Olds," *Qualitative Sociology* 34, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 337. Quoted in Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, 91.

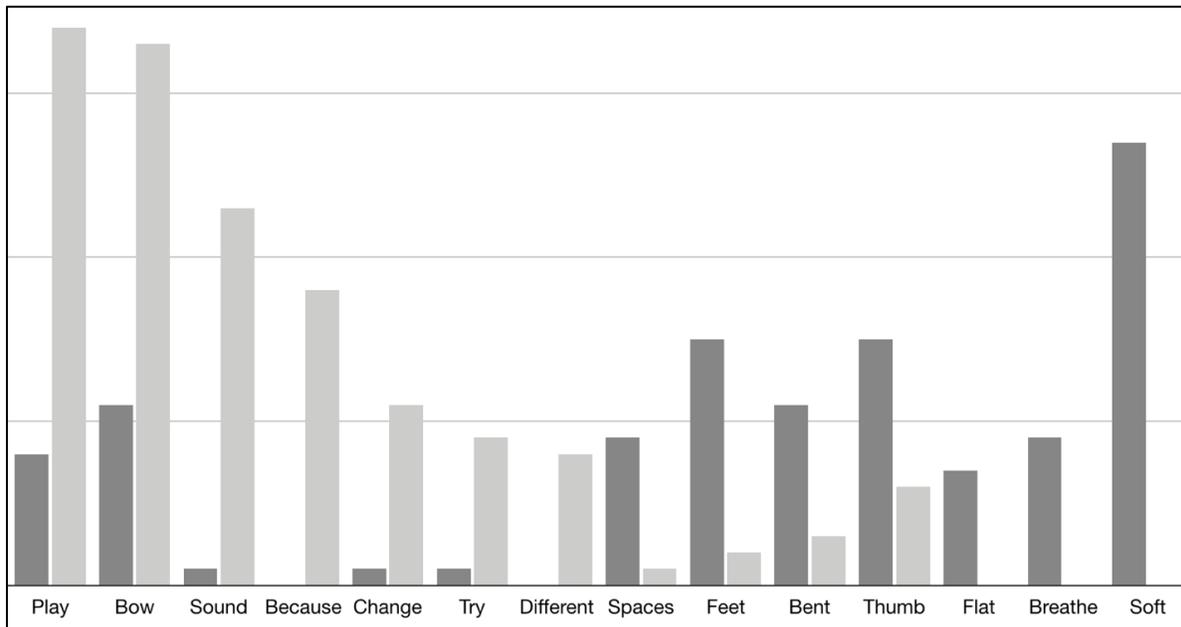


Figure 4.10: Word frequencies in Ronda Cole's (dark grey) and Pamela Wiley's language use (light grey).¹⁴²
Image by author.

In Figure 4.10, then, we see notable differences between Cole's and Wiley's most frequent words. Wiley's talk focuses on broader concepts, like "playing" and "sound," not only because Wiley immediately and constantly puts her students in the shoes of a musician with agency and an individual (and soon after putting bow to string, improvisational and creative) voice, but also because Zoe's first lesson involved significantly more sound, including the melodies of several tunes, as well as Wiley's guitar. Interestingly, where Wiley repeatedly says "because," explaining to Zoe the reasons she is making certain suggestions, Cole did not utter the word once in Eliza's lesson, as her instructions are specific and her disciplined interactional style does not involve her need to explain her teaching choices.¹⁴³ Wiley's use of "try" is also illustrative, as her understanding of students' individual differences foregrounds the act of experimentation in the face of a complex challenge, ensuing partial failure, and subsequent adjustment, whereas Cole rarely leaves room for significant

¹⁴² This comparison should be taken merely as general representations rather than absolute pronouncements about each teacher's language use, not least because the length and style of each lesson varied. I have grouped words with the same root—for instance, "foot" and "feet" or "play" and "playing"—together.

¹⁴³ However, Cole often explains why she is teaching in a certain way to parents in order to help them replicate the lesson's intention while practicing at home.

failures, presenting students with narrowly delimited tasks that they do not *try*, they *do*.¹⁴⁴ Finally, Cole's discussion of Eliza's individual body parts is conspicuous, and an accurate representation of the level of specificity she lends to every set of instructions, ensuring that no student misinterprets or fails to achieve the task at hand, regardless of their learning style, cognitive abilities or disabilities, or other individual differences.

Despite their many ideological differences, Cole and Wiley have arrived at a number of common understandings about the development of musical ability and its impact on their teaching. Well before Carol Dweck released her study on mindsets, both Cole and Wiley had learned to avoid making pronouncements to their students about their level of innate talent (regardless of what the teachers believe about that innate talent) in order to prevent the counterproductive behaviors that accompany students' belief in their own innate giftedness.¹⁴⁵ Both teachers fully embrace and encourage deliberate, repetitive practice, which Ericsson and others have found to be essential to a musician's success, regardless of whether or not, or to what degree, innate talent may exist.¹⁴⁶ Along with practice, both teachers also work to cultivate passion and perseverance in their students, although they take different approaches to doing so.¹⁴⁷ In one of my interviews with Wiley, she referred to a quotation attributed to Calvin Coolidge to explain her understanding of the role of natural talent in the cultivation of ability—a quotation that I remembered seeing posted on the bulletin board outside of Cole's studio: "Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not;

¹⁴⁴ In her teacher training sessions, Cole often instructs teachers not to ask their students to try something, as it signifies (even subtly or subconsciously) that there is the option not to succeed.

¹⁴⁵ Dweck, *Mindset*. As Wiley noted, "I don't talk—I think it's destructive to the kids to think about talent, that some are talented."

¹⁴⁶ K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-romer, "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," 2010.

¹⁴⁷ Duckworth, *Grit*. As mentioned earlier, Wiley sees the diverse and inspiring nature of O'Connor's repertoire choices, and the ability to hear the songs and tunes in a variety of interesting performance contexts as an important ingredient in fostering motivation and passion. Among other techniques, Cole works to cultivate a community of students whose level of dedication and musicality encourage beginners in her studio.

unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”¹⁴⁸

Most of all, Cole and Wiley share a substantial amount of experience as violin teachers. With hundreds of private students and about a century of years spent teaching between them, neither teacher approaches her students from a place of uncertainty, inexperience, or experimentation, as is the case with many younger teachers. Cole has continuously innovated and honed her teaching style to most deeply achieve her interpretation of Suzuki’s vision, which means that in addition to honing her students’ ears on highly subtle melodic lines, she is also able to teach her students “more than melody,” as Wiley puts it, along with other aspects of musicality that O’Connor has criticized Suzuki teachers of ignoring. Similarly, Wiley’s level of experience enabled her to make the very deliberate choice to abandon the detailed instructions and meticulous Western classical-oriented standards (like Cole’s) that she once followed as a Suzuki teacher in favor of a different set of priorities and ideologies of ability, which she sees as more valuable for her vision of musicianship.¹⁴⁹

Ultimately, the case studies of Cole and Wiley demonstrate how the Suzuki and O’Connor methods’ divergent ideologies of musical talent lead to drastically different understandings about educational equality—both in terms of what it looks like and how to achieve it. Suzuki and Cole believe that talent is accessible to all children with a loving and supportive environment. Therefore,

¹⁴⁸ While this quotation is often attributed to Coolidge, it is unverified that these words come directly from him.

¹⁴⁹ If there were room to extend this chapter’s research questions further, I would also have analyzed the teaching techniques and shifting understandings about talent possessed by less experienced teachers in each method, as the different pedagogical hierarchies Cole and Wiley pursue in their teaching become all the more apparent in the case of new teachers who are only able to focus on a limited set of skills in lessons. In observing the students of these younger teachers, therefore, their method and pedagogical focus is more immediately apparent. Often, students of younger Suzuki teachers have not yet mastered playing their instrument with other players or an accompanist; in contrast, students of younger O’Connor teachers often have not established a posture and familiarity with repetitive practice that allows them to play accurately and consistently in tune. If I had studied these younger teachers instead, we might be faced with a different set of considerations: many O’Connor families believe that Suzuki students quit more often because they become bored and burned out from repetitive practice; Suzuki teachers believe that O’Connor students develop habits that are difficult or impossible to break, preventing them from playing at a high level.

their emphasis on shaping these environments urges families to adjust their parenting styles and dedicate relatively extensive financial and temporal resources to their children's learning experiences. As a result, this environment-shaping is so profound that many families are either unable or unwilling to participate in the method. The families who do select into a studio like Cole's, however, can be certain that their child will attain the high level of playing that is standard for her studio.¹⁵⁰ In other words, Cole's uncompromising pursuit of the Suzuki philosophy supports her beliefs about talent through focusing on equality of outcome—equality of *achievement*. If all students are able to become talented, it is teachers' and parents' responsibility to find the necessary means to develop that talent.

Conversely, O'Connor and Wiley understand musical talent to be more heterogeneous and variably bestowed: some students will be faster learners; some will not be as driven to practice; each will have different musical tastes, enthusiasms, and creative voices; and a few (like Mark O'Connor) will be gifted with the innate tools to become truly exceptional—with the help of experienced teachers like Wiley and immersion in inspiring repertoire. According to this understanding, "equality" between students cannot realistically result in equal outcomes, with all students playing the same pieces at the (relatively) same level of proficiency; indeed, conceiving some collective high "level" is antithetical to a method that acknowledges such a vast array of genres, traditions, and modes of musical engagement. In the case of the O'Connor method's ideology of talent, then, equality is more oriented around opportunity—equality of *access*. Regardless of families' cultural values or social class, teachers like Wiley hope offer as many students as possible exposure to the O'Connor method's diversely inspiring sequence of repertoire and broad understanding of music-

¹⁵⁰ It is important to reiterate that within Cole's specific context, and according to her own finely-tuned perspective, her students do not achieve *truly* equal outcomes; some are offered full scholarships to conservatories and others do not, making the choice to pursue other career paths. Within a wider perspective, however—for instance, comparing Cole's students to those of less experienced or rigorous Suzuki teachers—Cole's students all attain comparably high levels of musicianship within a classical violin performance paradigm.

making. They hope to offer students the opportunity to experience musical growth and creativity, to have their interests piqued and their natural abilities uncovered, and then they facilitate the growth of those who show aptitude, interest, and perseverance. Debates over equality of opportunity and equality of access are not new.¹⁵¹ What this chapter has offered, however, is a glimpse into the ways this paradigmatic educational tension—which lies at the heart of Suzuki’s and O’Connor’s differing ideologies as well as Cole’s and Wiley’s different teaching approaches—rest upon fundamentally different understandings of talent.

¹⁵¹ For a helpful set of takes on this widely debated topic, see A. Wade Boykin and Pedro Noguera, *Creating the Opportunity to Learn: Moving from Research to Practice to Close the Achievement Gap* (ASCD, 2011); Prudence L. Carter and Kevin G. Welner, *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane, *Whither Opportunity?: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children’s Life Chances* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

Coda

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison writes, “definitions belong to the definers—not the defined.”¹ Over the course of the preceding four chapters, I have contended that musical talent is neither an immutable quality nor a matter of common sense, neither ontologically anchored nor objectively detectable. Nevertheless, some people have possessed the power to claim these qualities for talent. Thomas Jefferson and Francis Galton; Blind Tom’s masters and managers; the producers, judges, and voting audiences of talent shows; the violin method founders and teachers who have acted upon deeply divergent definitions of talent—these people and many others have used their privilege of definitional ownership to rank, sort, award, encourage, discourage, include, and exclude. As we have seen, however, the defined are not without agency, even if the definition of musical talent has not belonged to them to transform at their will. Sometimes they have wielded their voices, either spoken or sung, in ways that enabled them to become the definers themselves. To summon bell hooks’ words, which echo the discussion of discursive struggle that opened the dissertation, “Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to read ourselves—to reunite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.”²

While I have examined “musical talent” as one such place of struggle, I want to take a final step back to consider a neighboring place: the “music” which “musically talented” performers are celebrated for producing. This dissertation has argued that while musical talent has been reified as a thing, a gift, a trait, a possession we carry with us and present at will, the reality of musical ability development is much more ephemeral and evanescent in terms of time and (experiential, cultural, racial) distance—something that can shift over a person’s lifespan and change according to the

¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007), 225.

² Bell Hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (South End Press, 1989), 28.

discursive setting in which it is summoned.³ But music, too, has been reified. Along with many others, Christopher Small has contended that “there is no such thing as music,” suggesting instead that music can only be an activity, a process—indeed, an immensely diverse set of processes.⁴ If we change the emphasis of the common question, “is this person *talented* at music?” to become, “is this person talented at *music*?” with an understanding that the process of musicking can be undertaken for any number of reasons, the enterprise of evaluating a performer’s talent gains yet another dimension of contingency.⁵

For example, the two teachers featured in the final chapter forward fundamentally different definitions of talent: Ronda Cole believes, after Suzuki, that all children can become talented in the hands of a skilled teacher and a supportive environment. Pamela Wiley, following O’Connor, believes that some children are differently talented—sometimes quicker to learn, sometimes more passionately driven—than others, and that each will have their own unique musical voice. But behind these statements about musical talent are differing conceptions of music—what it *is*, but especially what it *achieves*. As Wiley commented,

There’s a difference between following instructions that appears to the world to be making music, and actually making music. And I said, most music education has the danger of creating this first kind of experience, where children follow instructions, they’re good kids, they do what they’re supposed to do, they learn Minuet 1 [...] and then they play it, and it appears to be music to most people. I can tell immediately whether a child is playing music, playing from their right brain and playing from their heart—*really* playing music.⁶

According to this conception, musicking is not simply the performance of a set of ordered sounds; it is a mode of experience, a way of understanding and engaging with whatever sounds are being

³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi made this point in the case of talent more generally some time ago, stating, “if we agree talent depends on social attributions rather than on a naturalistic trait locked in [one’s] physiology, then it follows that talent should be thought of not as a stable characteristic but as a dynamic quality dependent on changes within the individual and within the environment.” Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, “Culture, Time, and the Development of Talent.”

⁴ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 2.

⁵ Small, *Musicking*.

⁶ Personal interview with Pamela Wiley, April 22, 2018.

created. It is more than playing a melody, as Wiley often points out, but also more than any one individual's set of actions. Rather, it is something communal and communicative. In Wiley's conception, music does not require one specific level or genre of technical ability, no mastery of sautillé bow strokes or the capacity to play lightning-fast runs without an unclear or out-of-tune moment in its midst.

Cole, on the other hand, endorses a more Western classical conception of music—one that assigns musical performers a much more particular set of tasks. Although her understanding of musical talent is quite inclusive, then, her understanding of the music her students are tasked with producing is much more exclusive. In his expansive *Grove Dictionary* definition of music, which does for “music” something similar to what my first chapter has done for “musical talent,” Bruno Nettl noted that European art music's primary focus is on the creation of the musical work, the role of composers and the messages they intend to convey.⁷ To summon one extreme example of this understanding of music, Arnold Schonberg was said to proclaim that the performer “is totally unnecessary except as his interpretations make the music understandable to an audience unfortunate enough not to be able to read it in print.”⁸ For Cole, students do not simply play, they play *something*, a musical work—according to an established set of standards for that work that they either do or do not meet.

In Chapter 3, a different set of conflicting assumptions about the purpose of musicking pervaded the discourses of producers, judges, and fans. Talent show contestants were initially judged according to whether or not their performance evoked affective and emotional responses in the set of judges, a process that characterized music as a highly personal process of transmission, something that inspires, provokes, moves. Later, however, the contestants were asked to perform on a large

⁷ Bruno Nettl, “Music,” Grove Music Online, 2001, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

⁸ Nicholas Cook, “Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance,” *Music Theory Online* 7, no. 2 (April 1, 2001), <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html>.

stage for a inevitably more diverse live audience and were evaluated according to a nationwide, democratic vote—a process that portrayed musicking as a universal process that transcends genre, context, and taste. And, after being declared the most talented contestant on *America's Got Talent* or the most ideal singer on *American Idol*, winners are submitted to one final set of musical definitions—those of the much more capitalist and genre-specific music industry. It should not be surprising, then, that so few contestants who musically succeed on these reality television programs go on to find musical success in reality.

Said simply, musical talent can only be rendered meaningful in relation to the music that it brings to life. Rather than asking whether or not individuals have musical *talent*, or even *musical* talent, perhaps it might be more useful for teachers and scholars to interrogate the goals that are trying to be achieved through each process of musicking. Musical talent (not unlike musicological talent) is not simply an academic concept to be contemplated with more care and represented with more nuance—or a wider range of synonyms that mask an underlying frame of mind. Rather, the preceding stories of musical talent relate to the lived experiences of anyone who engages in music-making, and especially those who influence gatekeeping processes or serve as educators and mentors. In other words, this interrogation of musical talent not only encourages scholars and teachers reconsider the ways they think, but also the ways they act.

In the case of Nasir and Daequan, the two students featured at the very beginning of the dissertation, my goal as a teacher was to offer them, through music, a way to reflect upon their learning processes, a chance to express themselves in a new way, an opportunity to explore history and cultural difference, and an activity through which to build relationships. Given that goal, there was little that aptitude tests or standardized exams could measure. Musical talent, according to any of the dictionary definitions outlined in Table 1.1, was beside the point. In her discussion of language as a place of struggle cited at the start of this section, bell hooks recalls words from a poem

by Adrienne Rich: “this is the oppressor’s language, yet I need to talk to you.” For Nasir and Daequan, and many other voices that have emerged in the preceding case studies, musical talent was defined for them using the oppressor’s language, and that language did not only produce a confounding case of Du Boisian double consciousness, but an act of violence between them, not to mention other, more insidious types of injury. As hooks reminds us, again and again, language is also a place of struggle.

Bibliography

- “A Black Prodigy in the Musical World: From the Baltimore Patriot.” *Chicago Press and Tribune*, February 7, 1860, sec. page 2.
- “About Auditioning for America’s Got Talent.” *Official America’s Got Talent Audition Site 2017-2018* (blog), October 10, 2013. <http://www.americasgottalentauditions.com/about/>.
- “About the O’Connor Method.” Accessed July 26, 2018. <http://www.oconnormethod.com/About-Us.html>.
- Adams, James Truslow. *The Epic of America*. Transaction Publishers, 2012.
- “Amateur Night At The Apollo.” *Apollo Theater* (blog). Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://www.apollotheater.org/amateur-night/>.
- Agamben, Giorgio, and Daniel Heller-Roazen. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Agawu, Victor Kofi. *African Rhythm Hardback with Accompanying CD: A Northern Ewe Perspective*. CUP Archive, 1995.
- Albrecht, Gary L., Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury. *Handbook of Disability Studies*. SAGE, 2001.
- Anderson, Paul Allen. *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought*. Duke University Press, 2001.
- Andreasen, N. C. “Creativity and Mental Illness: Prevalence Rates in Writers and Their First-Degree Relatives.” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 144, no. 10 (October 1987): 1288–92.
- Anthony Ying. *Americas Got Talent 2016 Jayna Brown 14 Y.O. Sings a Classic Full Audition Clip S11E04*. Accessed May 3, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfgYL4RXnsc>.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Arendt, Hannah, and Jerome Kohn. *Between Past and Future*. Penguin, 2006.
- Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Vintage Books, 1962.
- Aristotle. *De Anima*. Cosimo, Inc., 2008.
- . *The Metaphysics*. Courier Corporation, 2013.
- Aristotle, and John Henry MacMahon. *The Metaphysics of Aristotle*. G. Bell and sons, 1896.
- Aruffo, Madeline. “Problems with the Noble Lie.” *The Journal of the Core Curriculum*, no. 23 (Spring 2014). <http://www.bu.edu/core/community/the-core-journal/xxiii/>.

- “At The Academy of Music: Blind Tom’s Concerts.” *New York Tribune*, October 11, 1865.
- Auer, Leopold. *Violin Playing as I Teach It*. Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1921.
- “Bad Singers on American Idol Autistic??! | Wrong Planet Autism Community Forum.” Accessed April 12, 2018. <http://wrongplanet.net/forums/viewtopic.php?p=453587>.
- Bailey, Kenneth D. *Typologies and Taxonomies: An Introduction to Classification Techniques*. SAGE, 1994.
- Baker, I. L. *George Orwell, Animal Farm*. London: J. Brodie, 1961.
- Bakken, Jeffrey P., Festus E. Obiakor, and Anthony F. Rotatori. *Gifted Education: Current Perspectives and Issues*. Emerald Group Publishing, 2014.
- Baraka, Amiri. *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music*. University of California Press, 2009.
- Baron, M. Grace. *Stress and Coping in Autism*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Macmillan, 1972.
- . *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*. Northwestern University Press, 2009.
- Barton, Kristin M. “Why We Watch Them Sing and Dance: The Uses and Gratifications of Talent-Based Reality Television.” *Communication Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2013): 217–35.
- Bates, Alan W. *Emblematic Monsters: Unnatural Conceptions and Deformed Births in Early Modern Europe*. Rodopi, 2005.
- Beck, Julie. “The Voice’s Empty Promise of the American Dream.” *The Atlantic*, March 28, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/03/the-voice-and-the-american-dream/520884/>.
- Becket, John F. “Blind Tom as He Is To-Day.” *The Ladies’ Home Journal* 15, no. 10 (September 1898): 13.
- Behrend, Louise. *The Suzuki Approach*. Alfred Music, 1971.
- Bell, Karl. *The Magical Imagination: Magic and Modernity in Urban England, 1780-1914*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Penguin Books Limited, 2008.
- Berger, Ronald J. “Disability and the Dedicated Wheelchair Athlete: Beyond the ‘Supercrip’ Critique.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 37, no. 6 (December 1, 2008): 647–78.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Bernstein, Robin. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. NYU Press, 2011.

- Best, Stephen M. *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Binet, Alfred, and Théodore Simon. *The Development of Intelligence in Children: (The Binet-Simon Scale)*. Williams & Wilkins, 1916.
- "Bio | Barbara Lamb Music." Accessed June 28, 2018. <http://barbaralamb.net/bio/>.
- "Biography of Thomas Bethune Also Known as Thomas Wiggins - Blind Tom." Accessed July 24, 2018. <http://www.twainquotes.com/archangels.html>.
- Black, Edwin. *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*. Dialog Press, 2012.
- Blacking, John. *How Musical Is Man?* University of Washington Press, 1973.
- "Blind Tom." *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 26, 1891.
- "Blind Tom at the Orpheum." *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 29, 1903.
- "Blind Tom' Dead. Singular Old Negro Pianist of Marvelous Musical Powers Passes in Sixtieth Year." *The Coconino Sun*. July 10, 1908, sec. Page 3.
- "Blind Tom' Makes a Reappearance: Many Times Reported Dead, but the Old Man Turns Up at the Circle Theatre." *New York Herald*, January 12, 1904.
- "Blind Tom, the Negro Pianist." *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, April 1, 1867.
- "Blind Tome Bethune: The Death of His Old Master Recalls the Prodigy." *The Washington Post*, February 14, 1895.
- "BLIND TOM'S' LIFE ENDS: Negro Musical Prodigy Dies in Hoboken--Was Born in Slavery." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*. June 15, 1908.
- "Blind Tom's Piano Recitals." *New York Tribune*, September 18, 1877.
- "Bob Phillips | Alfred Music." Accessed May 12, 2018. <https://www.alfred.com/authors/bob-phillips/>.
- Bogdan, Robert. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Bohlman, Philip V. "The Politics of Power, Pleasure and Prayer in the Eurovision Song Contest." *Muzikologija*, no. 7 (2007): 39–67.
- Bohlmann, Markus P. J., and Sean Moreland. *Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters: Essays on Cinema's Holy Terrors*. McFarland, 2015.
- "Booking Agency for American Idol: Book Top American Idol Singers." Accessed June 16, 2018. https://www.allamericanspeakers.com/celebrity_booking_agency/American_Idol.php.

- Borland, James H. "The Construct of Giftedness." *Peabody Journal of Education* 72 (1997): 6–20.
- Boykin, A. Wade, and Pedro Noguera. *Creating the Opportunity to Learn: Moving from Research to Practice to Close the Achievement Gap*. ASCD, 2011.
- Brahms, Johannes, and Styra Avins. *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*. Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Branson, Jan, and Don Miller. *Damned for Their Difference: The Cultural Construction of Deaf People as "Disabled": A Sociological History*. Gallaudet University Press, 2002.
- Bresler, Liora. *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*. Springer Science & Business Media, 2007.
- Brodsky, Seth. *From 1989, Or European Music and the Modernist Unconscious*. University of California Press, 2017.
- Brooks, Daphne A. "Puzzling the Intervals': Blind Tom and the Poetics of the Sonic Slave Narrative." *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, 2014.
- Brown. "Tom." *Dwight's Journal of Music* 19 (May 18, 1861): 55.
- Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.
- Bruinius, Harry. *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America's Quest for Racial Purity*. Vintage Books, 2007.
- Bruni, Frank. "Show Us Your Woe." *The New York Times*, May 19, 2013, sec. SR3.
- Bucholtz, Mary. "The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (June 28, 2008): 84–100.
- Burns, A. R. *Money and Monetary Policy in Early Times*. Routledge, 2013.
- Campbell, Patricia S. "Ethnomusicology and Music Education: Crossroads for Knowing Music, Education, and Culture." *Research Studies in Music Education* 21, no. 1 (December 1, 2003): 16–30.
- Campbell, Patricia Shehan. *Songs in Their Heads: Music and Its Meaning in Children's Lives, Second Edition*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Carter, Prudence L., and Kevin G. Welner. *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Cather, Willa. *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*. U of Nebraska Press, 1970.
- Chalaby, Jean K. *The Format Age: Television's Entertainment Revolution*. John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

- Chambers, Elizabeth G., Mark Foulon, Helen Handfield-Jones, Steven M. Hankin, and Edward G. Michaels. "The War for Talent." *The McKinsey Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (June 22, 1998): 44.
- Cheng, William. "Staging Overcoming: Narratives of Disability and Meritocracy in Reality Singing Competitions." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 11, no. 2 (May 2017): 184–214.
- Chronicle., Special Dispatch to the. "FAMOUS NEGRO PIANIST DEAD: "Blind Tom," Sensation of Two Continents, Passes Away." *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File)*. June 15, 1908.
- Clarke, Mark A. "The Scope of Approach, the Importance of Method, and the Nature of Technique." *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics*, 1983, 106–15.
- Clayton, Martin, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton. *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*. Psychology Press, 2003.
- Collier, David, Jody LaPorte, and Jason Seawright. "Putting Typologies to Work: Concept Formation, Measurement, and Analytic Rigor." *Political Research Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (March 2012): 217–32.
- Collings, David G., Kamel Mellahi, and Wayne F. Cascio. *The Oxford Handbook of Talent Management*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Collins, David R. *Dr. Shinichi Suzuki: Teaching Music from the Heart*. Morgan Reynolds, 2002.
- Colver, Mitchell C., and Amani El-Alayli. "Getting Aesthetic Chills from Music: The Connection between Openness to Experience and Frisson." *Psychology of Music* 44, no. 3 (May 1, 2016): 413–27.
- "Commentary: Why America Eliminated the Two Black Singers on The Voice." BET.com. Accessed June 28, 2018. <https://www.bet.com/news/national/2014/05/07/commentary-why-america-eliminated-the-two-black-singers-on-the-voice.html?cid=facebook>.
- Company, Johnson Publishing. *Black World/Negro Digest*. Johnson Publishing Company, 1961.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Cook, Nicholas. "Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance." *Music Theory Online* 7, no. 2 (April 1, 2001). <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html>.
- Cooper, Robert K. *The Other 90%: How to Unlock Your Vast Untapped Potential for Leadership and Life*. Crown Publishing Group, 2010.
- Cottrell, Stephen. *Professional Music-Making in London: Ethnography and Experience*. Ashgate, 2004.
- Couldry, Nick. "Reality TV, or The Secret Theater of Neoliberalism." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 11, 2008): 3–13.

- Cowgill, Rachel. *“Proofs of Genius”: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and the Construction of Musical Prodigies in Early Georgian London*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *The Systems Model of Creativity: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*. Berlin: Springer, 2014.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, and Rick E. Robinson. “Culture, Time, and the Development of Talent.” In *The Systems Model of Creativity*, 27–46. Springer Netherlands, 2014.
- Cullen, Frank. *Vaudeville Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performances in America*. Psychology Press, n.d.
- Curran, Thomas, and Andrew P. Hill. “Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences From 1989 to 2016.” *Psychological Bulletin*, December 28, 2017.
- Cutieta, Robert A. *Raising Musical Kids: A Guide for Parents*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Cvetkovski, Trajce. *The Pop Music Idol and the Spirit of Charisma: Reality Television Talent Shows in the Digital Economy of Hope*. Springer, 2015.
- Dahl, Melissa. “Don’t Believe the Hype About Grit, Pleads the Scientist Behind the Concept.” *The Cut*, May 9, 2016. <https://www.thecut.com/2016/05/dont-believe-the-hype-about-grit-pleads-the-scientist-behind-the-concept.html>.
- Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection, Or, the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*. Appleton, 1883.
- Daston, Lorraine. “The Naturalistic Fallacy Is Modern.” *Isis* 105, no. 3 (September 1, 2014): 579–87.
- Davenport, Charles Benedict. “Scientific Papers of the Second International Congress of Eugenics Held at American Museum of Natural History, New York.” In *Wellcome Library*, 1921.
- Davis, Rebecca Harding. “Blind Tom.” *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1862.
- . *Rebecca Harding Davis’s Stories of the Civil War Era: Selected Writings from the Borderlands*. University of Georgia Press, 2010.
- D.E.F. Keys (M.D.). “Rational Recreation: Letters to Well-Known Characters, To J. V. Bridgeman, Esq.” *The Musical World*, September 1, 1866.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. A&C Black, 2004.
- “Demographics.” Suzuki Association of the Americas. Accessed August 23, 2017. <https://suzukiassociation.org/about/stats/>.
- DeNora, Tia. *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1803*. University of California Press, 1995.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

- Deutsch, Otto Erich. *Mozart: A Documentary Biography*. Stanford University Press, 1966.
- Diderot, Denis. *Rameau's Nephew / D'Alembert's Dream*. Penguin UK, 1976.
- Dodd, Susan. *Understanding Autism*. Elsevier Australia, 2005.
- Dolar, Mladen. "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night': Lacan and the Uncanny." *October* 58 (1991): 5–23.
- Doniger, Wendy, and Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions Wendy Doniger. *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. "Pan-African Association. To the Nations of the World," 1900. University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.
- . *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1st Vintage Books/Library of America ed. New York: Vintage Books/Library of America, 1990.
- Duane, Anna Mae. *Child Slavery before and after Emancipation: An Argument for Child-Centered Slavery Studies*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Duckworth, Angela. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Simon and Schuster, 2016.
- Duncan, Greg J., and Richard J. Murnane. *Whither Opportunity?: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2011.
- Dunning, John. *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- During, Simon. *Modern Enchantments*. Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Dweck, Carol. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House Publishing Group, 2006.
- Edward Seguin. *Traitement moral, hygiène et éducation des idiots et des autres enfants arriérés*. J.B. Baillière, 1846.
- Eliot, George. *O May I Join the Choir Invisible!* D. Lothrop, 1884.
- Elsworth, Catherine. "US Pop Show Victor Attracts More Votes than Any President." *The Telegraph*, May 26, 2006, sec. World News.
- Erickson, Frederick. "Taught Cognitive Learning in Its Immediate Environments: A Neglected Topic in the Anthropology of Education." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1982): 149–80.
- Ericsson, K. Anders, Ralf T. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-romer. "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," 2010.
- Erlingsdottir, Iris. "Susan Boyle: The Diamond in the Rough." *Huffington Post* (blog), May 19, 2009. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/iris-lee/the-diamond-in-the-rough_b_188642.html.

- Eudell, Demetrius L. *The Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- F. "More about Tom." *Dwight's Journal of Music* 22, no. 10 (December 6, 1862).
- Fairclough, Norman L. "Critical and Descriptive Goals in Discourse Analysis." *Journal of Pragmatics* 9, no. 6 (December 1, 1985): 739–63.
- Ferguson, Frances. *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action*. University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Fink, Robert. *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*. University of California Press, 2005.
- Finnegan, Ruth. *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Fiske, John. *Television Culture*. Methuen, 1987.
- Fleming, James Dougal. *The Invention of Discovery, 1500–1700*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013.
- Foucault, Michel. "Orders of Discourse." *Social Science Information* 10, no. 2 (April 1, 1971): 7–30.
- Fowler, Henry Watson, Francis George Fowler, and James Augustus Henry Murray. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1919.
- Fowler, Orson Squire. *The Practical Phrenologist and Recorder and Delineator of the Character and Talents of [Blank], as Marked by [Blank]: A Compendium of Phreno-Organic Science*. O.S. Fowler, 1869.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Herder and Herder, 1970.
- Frow, John. *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*. Clarendon Press, 1997.
- G. S. "The Blind Negro Boy Pianist." *Dwight's Journal of Music*, February 11, 1860, 364.
- Gabriel, Marsha T., Joseph W. Critelli, and Jullana S. Ee. "Narcissistic Illusions in Self-Evaluations of Intelligence and Attractiveness." *Journal of Personality* 62, no. 1 (n.d.): 143–55.
- Gabriel, Susan Laine, and Isaiah Smithson. *Gender in the Classroom: Power and Pedagogy*. University of Illinois Press, 1990.
- Gagne, Francoys. "A Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent. Year 2000 Update," 2000. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED448544>.
- . "Nature or Nurture? A Re-Examination of Sloboda and Howe's (1991) Interview Study on Talent Development in Music." *Psychology of Music* 27, no. 1 (April 1, 1999): 38–51.
- Gaines, Kevin K. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. UNC Press Books, 2012.

- Galloway, Lou. *Hidden Secrets of God's Economy*. Xulon Press, 2008.
- Galton, Francis. *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry Into Its Laws and Consequences*. Macmillan, 1869.
- Gardner, Howard. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Basic Books, 1993.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Garofalo, Reebee. "Culture Versus Commerce: The Marketing of Black Popular Music." *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 275–87.
- Garson, Alfred. *Suzuki Twinkles: An Intimate Portrait*. Alfred Music, 2001.
- Gaztambide-Fernandez, Ruben A. "Why the Arts Don't 'Do' Anything: Toward a New Vision for Cultural Production in Education." *Harvard Educational Review* 83, no. 1 (2013): 211–37.
- Gee, James. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. Routledge, 2015.
- Gee, James Paul. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. Routledge, 2014.
- Geiringer, Karl. *Brahms: His Life and Work*. Da Capo Press, 2009.
- Gell, Alfred. "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology." In *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, edited by Jeremy Coote. Clarendon Press, 1994.
- "Get the Hook! A Night With Amateur Thespians at the Burlesque Theater." *Milwaukee Free Press*, March 25, 1906.
- Giannone, Richard. *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction*. U of Nebraska Press, 2001.
- Gifts, Talents and Challenges: Untapped Potential of Adults with EASD*. University of Northern British Columbia (Canada), 2008.
- Gilbert, David. *The Product of Our Souls: Ragtime, Race, and the Birth of the Manhattan Musical Marketplace*. UNC Press Books, 2015.
- Gillies, James, Robert A. Neimeyer, and Evgenia Milman. "The Meaning of Loss Codebook: Construction of a System for Analyzing Meanings Made in Bereavement." *Death Studies* 38, no. 4 (April 21, 2014): 207–16.
- Gilliland, Norman. *Grace Notes for a Year: Stories of Hope, Humor & Hubris from the World of Classical Music*. NEMO Productions, 2002.
- Giudicissi, Michael. *Changing Lives: Achieving Your Untapped Potential*. Author's Choice Publishing, 2006.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. "The Talent Myth." *The New Yorker*, n.d.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/07/22/the-talent-myth>.
- Goddard, Henry Herbert. *Psychology of the Normal and Subnormal*. Dodd, Mead and Company, 1919.

- Goffman, Erving. "On Cooling the Mark Out." *Psychiatry* 15, no. 4 (November 1, 1952): 451–63.
- . *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin Books, 1959.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Random House Publishing Group, 2012.
- Goto-Jones, Chris. *Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Gove, Philip Babcock. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language: Unabridged. A Merriam-Webster. Utilizing All the Experience and Resources of More Than One Hundred Years of Merriam-Webster Dictionaries*. G. & C Merriam Company, 1969.
- Grabe, Maria Elizabeth, Shuhua Zhou, and Brooke Barnett. "Explicating Sensationalism in Television News: Content and the Bells and Whistles of Form." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 45, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 635–55.
- Gramsci, Antonio, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. International Publishers, 1971.
- Gray, Herman. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness."* U of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Grazian, David. "The Production of Popular Music as a Confidence Game: The Case of the Chicago Blues." *Qualitative Sociology* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 137–58.
- Greene, Doyle. *Politics and the American Television Comedy: A Critical Survey from I Love Lucy through South Park*. McFarland, 2007.
- Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Grue, Jan. "The Problem of the Supercrip: Representation and Misrepresentation of Ability." In *Disability Research Today: International Perspectives*. Routledge, 2015.
- Hall, Stuart. "The Rediscovery of Ideology: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies." In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (, 111–41, 1982.
- Hallam, Susan, and Vanessa Prince. "Conceptions of Musical Ability." *Research Studies in Music Education* 20, no. 1 (June 1, 2003): 2–22.
- Harrison, Luke, and Psyche Loui. "Thrills, Chills, Frissons, and Skin Orgasms: Toward an Integrative Model of Transcendent Psychophysiological Experiences in Music." *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (July 23, 2014).
- Harry Houdini. *A Magician Among The Spirits*, 1924.
<http://archive.org/details/1924HoudiniAMagicianAmongTheSpirits>.
- Hartzman, Marc. *American Sideshow: An Encyclopedia of History's Most Wondrous and Curiously Strange Performers*. Penguin, 2006.

- Hass, L., F. Coppa, and J. Peck. *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Springer, 2008.
- Hedger, Stephen C., Shannon L. M. Heald, and Howard C. Nusbaum. "Absolute Pitch May Not Be So Absolute." *Psychological Science* 24, no. 8 (August 1, 2013): 1496–1502.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Aesthetics*: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- Heller, Kurt. *The International Handbook of Giftedness and Talent*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Elsevier, 2000.
- Hemmasi, Farzaneh. "“One Can Veil and Be a Singer!”: Performing Piety on an Iranian Talent Competition." *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 13, no. 3 (November 18, 2017): 416–37.
- Hermann, Evelyn. *Shinichi Suzuki: The Man and His Philosophy (Revised)*. Alfred Music, 1999.
- Herrnstein, Richard J., and Charles Murray. *Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. Simon and Schuster, 2010.
- Herzog, William R. *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.
- Hill, Annette. *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*. Psychology Press, 2005.
- Hoffman, Adria R. "“Blessed”: Musical Talent, Smartness, & Figured Identities." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 48, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 606–20.
- Holland, Bernard. "MUSIC REVIEW; A Parade of Young Talent Brightens a Gala." *The New York Times*, September 21, 2006, sec. Arts. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/21/arts/music-review-a-parade-of-young-talent-brightens-a-gala.html>.
- Hollingworth, Leta Stetter. *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture*. Macmillan, 1929.
- Holmes, Su, and Deborah Jermyn. *Understanding Reality Television*. Psychology Press, 2004.
- Honda, Masaaki. *Suzuki Changed My Life*. Alfred Music, 1976.
- . *The Vehicle of Music -- Reflections on a Life with Shinichi Suzuki and the Talent Education Movement*. Alfred Music, 2002.
- Honeyman, W. C. "Real Violin Romances: Paganini’s Magical Guarnerius." *The Lotus Magazine* 9, no. 2 (1917): 84–90.
- Hooks, Bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. South End Press, 1989.
- Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. "Talent." Online Dictionary. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. Accessed May 20, 2018. <https://www.ahdictionary.com/>.
- "How Blind Tom Eats." *The Youth’s Companion*, December 7, 1876.

- Howe, Michael J. A., Jane W. Davidson, and John A. Sloboda. "Innate Talents: Reality Or Myth?" *Journal. Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 1998. <http://cogprints.org/656/>.
- Hubbs, Nadine. *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*. Univ of California Press, 2014.
- . *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity*. University of California Press, 2004.
- Hunter, Robert. *Universal Dictionary of the English Language: A New and Original Work Presenting for Convenient Reference the Orthography, Pronunciation, Meaning, Use, Origin and Development of Every Word in the English Language Together with Condensed Explanations of Fifty Thousand Important Subjects and an Exhaustive Encyclopaedia of All the Arts and Sciences Profusely Illustrated*. P. F. Collier, 1899.
- Huron, David Brian. *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation*. MIT Press, 2006.
- Hyers, Conrad. *Once-Born, Twice-Born Zen: The Soto and Rinzai Schools of Japan*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004.
- Inati, Shams. *Ibn Sina's Remarks and Admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics*. Columbia University Press, 2014.
- "Including Diverse Learners in Gifted Education Programs and Services | National Association for Gifted Children." Accessed June 20, 2018. <http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/timely-topics/including-diverse-learners-gifted-education-programs>.
- Jackson, Travis A. *Blowin' the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene*. University of California Press, 2012.
- Jacquette, Dale. *Schopenhauer, Philosophy and the Arts*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- Jarvin, Linda, and Rena F. Subotnik. "Wisdom From Conservatory Faculty: Insights on Success in Classical Music Performance." *Roeper Review* 32, no. 2 (March 25, 2010): 78–87.
- "Jayna Brown." GigSalad. Accessed May 3, 2018. https://www.gigsalad.com/jayna_brown_atlanta.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. J. Stockdale, 1787.
- Jensen-Moulton, Stephanie. "Finding Autism in the Compositions of a 19th Century Prodigy: Reconsidering 'Blind Tom' Wiggins." In *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*. Routledge, 2006.
- Jhally, Sut, Stuart Hall, and Media Education Foundation. *Race: The Floating Signifier*. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997.

- Johnson, Paul Christopher. "An Atlantic Genealogy of 'Spirit Possession.'" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, no. 2 (2011): 393–425.
- Johnson, Samuel, John Walker, and Robert S. Jameson. *A Dictionary of the English Language*. W. Pickering, 1828.
- Johnson, Stephen. *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*. Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2012.
- Jolly, Jennifer L. *A History of American Gifted Education*. Routledge, 2018.
- Jones, Jeanette DiBernardo. "Imagined Hearing." *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, December 10, 2015.
- Jørgensen, Marianne W., and Louise J. Phillips. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. SAGE, 2002.
- Justin Kruger, and David Dunning. "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments," 2013.
- K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-romer. "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," 2010.
- Kartomi, Margaret J. *On Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Kaufman, James C., Michelle L. Evans, and John Baer. "The American Idol Effect: Are Students Good Judges of Their Creativity across Domains?" *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 3–17.
- Kaufman, Scott Barry. *The Complexity of Greatness: Beyond Talent or Practice*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Kawabata, Mai. *Paganini: The "demonic" Virtuoso*. Boydell Press, 2013.
- Keefe, Simon P. *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Kendall, John. *The Suzuki® Violin Method in American Music Education*. Alfred Music, 1973.
- Kinderman, William. *Beethoven*. University of California Press, 1995.
- Kingsbury, Henry. *Music Talent & Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.
- Kivy, Peter. *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius*. Yale University Press, 2001.
- Knott, Stephen. *Amateur Craft: History and Theory*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

- “Kristin Powell- A Fake! :: American Idol (Past Seasons) «idolforums.Com.” Accessed March 14, 2018. <https://idolforums.com/index.php?showtopic=84429>.
- Laclau, Ernesto. *Emancipation(S)*. Verso Books, 1996.
- . *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*. Verso Books, 1977.
- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony And Socialist Strategy: Towards A Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso Books, 2014.
- Lakoff, George. “A Figure of Thought,” no. 3 (1986).
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Lampert, Khen. *Meritocratic Education and Social Worthlessness*. Springer, 2012.
- Landers, Ray. *Is Suzuki Education Working in America?* Alfred Music, 1987.
- Lannom, Jack. *Untapped Potential: Turning Ordinary People into Extraordinary Performers*. Thomas Nelson Inc, 1998.
- Lareau, Annette. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. University of California Press, 2003.
- Lawless, John. “O’Connor Family Band to Rounder.” *Bluegrass Today* (blog), February 3, 2016. <https://bluegrasstoday.com/oconnor-family-band-to-rounder/>.
- Layman. “Serious Reading: Lay Sermon.” *Jamestown Journal*. September 12, 1873.
- Lee, Jungmin. “American Idol: Evidence of Same-Race Preferences?” SSRN Scholarly Paper. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, February 1, 2006.
- Leistra-Jones, Karen. “Staging Authenticity: Joachim, Brahms, and the Politics of Werktreue Performance.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (2013): 397–436.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Lie, Nadia, and Theo d’Haen. *Constellation Caliban: Figurations of a Character*. Rodopi, 1997.
- Lightheart, Willie. “Letter from Willie Lightheart.” *Yorkeville Inquirer*, June 16, 1860.
- Littler, Jo. *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. Routledge, 2017.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. T. Tegg and Son, 1836.
- Loeffler, Zachary. “Speaking of Magic: Enchantment and Disenchantment in Music’s Modernist Ordinary.” Ph.D., University of Chicago, 2018.
- Logan, Rayford Whittingham. *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*. Collier Books, 1972.

- Lorenzo-Dus, N., and P. Blitvich. *Real Talk: Reality Television and Discourse Analysis in Action*. Springer, 2013.
- Lubar, David. *Hidden Talents*. Macmillan, 2015.
- Lule, Jack. *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*. Guilford Press, 2001.
- Lunn, Eugene. *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno*. University of California Press, 1984.
- Macnamara, Brooke N., David Z. Hambrick, and Frederick L. Oswald. "Deliberate Practice and Performance in Music, Games, Sports, Education, and Professions A Meta-Analysis." *Psychological Science*, July 1, 2014, 0956797614535810.
- MacRae, Ian, Adrian Furnham, and Martin Reed. *High Potential: How to Spot, Manage and Develop Talented People at Work*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.
- Magic, Unity, Might*. Society of American Magicians, 1916.
- Magill, Charles T. "Blind Tom, Unsolved Problem in Musical History." *Chicago Defender*, August 19, 1922.
- Magill, Kevin R., and Arturo Rodriguez. *Imagining Education: Beyond the Logic Of Global Neoliberal Capitalism*. IAP, 2017.
- Mandy Harvey – Try*. Accessed June 27, 2018. <https://genius.com/Mandy-harvey-try-lyrics>.
- "Mandy Harvey 'Tried' – And Succeeded. And Yet...." *Deaf Pagan Crossroads* (blog), June 9, 2017. <https://deafpagancrossroads.com/2017/06/08/mandy-harvey-tried-and-succeeded-and-yet/>.
- Mark, Michael L. *Source Readings in Music Education History*. Schirmer Books, 1982.
- Mark O'Connor. *Best "Boil 'em Cabbage Down" Ever! - Mark O'Connor/Wynton Marsalis*, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyt646v4hxA>.
- "Mark O'Connor - Posts." Accessed August 30, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/markoconnorfanpage/posts/10152109106701140>.
- "Mark O'Connor - String Ties." *No Depression*, December 31, 2003. <http://nodepression.com/article/mark-oconnor-string-ties>.
- "Mark O'Connor Official Website - Bio." Accessed September 14, 2017. <https://markoconnor.com/bio>.
- Martin, Douglas. "Sandman Sims, 86, Tap Dancer and Fixture at the Apollo." *The New York Times*, May 30, 2003, sec. Arts.

- Mason, Chad, and Karen Brackman. *Educating Today's Overindulged Youth: Combat Narcissism by Building Foundations, Not Pedestals*. R&L Education, 2009.
- Mason, Lowell, and Boston Academy of Music. *Manual of the Boston Academy of Music, for Instruction in the Elements of Vocal Music, on the System of Pestalozzi*. Boston, J.H. Wilkins & R.B. Carter, 1838.
- Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect." *Cultural Critique*, no. 31 (1995): 83–109.
- Matthews, Ralph. "Everybody's Riding on the Wheel of Chance: Amateur Radio Hours Have an Allure for All Types and Ages--Major Bowers Takes Em All." *Afro-American*, April 3, 1937.
- Mauss, Marcel. *Essai Sur Le Don*. Psychology Press, 2002.
- . *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Routledge, 2002.
- McClain, Amanda Scheiner. *American Ideal: How American Idol Constructs Celebrity, Collective Identity, and American Discourses*. Lexington Books, 2011.
- McDonagh, Patrick. *Idiocy: A Cultural History*. Liverpool University Press, 2008.
- McDonald, Robert M. S. "The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Retirement Series." *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (June 1, 2013): 190–91.
- McIntyre, Lee. *Post-Truth*. MIT Press, 2018.
- McMahon, Darrin M. *Divine Fury: A History of Genius*. Basic Books, 2013.
- Mehl, Margaret. "Cultural Translation in Two Directions: The Suzuki Method in Japan and Germany." *Research and Issues in Music Education* 7, no. 1 (September 1, 2009).
- . *Not By Love Alone: The Violin in Japan, 1850-2010*. Sound Book Press, 2014.
- Merriam, Alan P. *The Anthropology of Music*. Northwestern University Press, 1964.
- Metzer, David. *The Ballad in American Popular Music: From Elvis to Beyoncé*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Mexico, Barbara Hannan Associate Professor of Philosophy University of New. *The Riddle of the World: A Reconsideration of Schopenhauer's Philosophy: A Reconsideration of Schopenhauer's Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Molnar-Szakacs, Istvan, and Katie Overy. "Music and Mirror Neurons: From Motion to 'e'motion." *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 1, no. 3 (December 2006): 235–41.
- Moore, David S. *The Dependent Gene: The Fallacy of "Nature Vs. Nurture"*. Macmillan, 2003.
- Moore, Elizabeth, Stephanie Woodley, and Christina Borders. "Inclusion and Giftedness." In *Gifted Education: Current Perspectives and Issues*, 26:127–46. *Advances in Special Education* 26. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014.

- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007.
- Mosing, Miriam A., Guy Madison, Nancy L. Pedersen, Ralf Kuja-Halkola, and Fredrik Ullén. "Practice Does Not Make Perfect No Causal Effect of Music Practice on Music Ability." *Psychological Science*, July 30, 2014.
- Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. U of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Murray, Susan, and Laurie Ouellette. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. NYU Press, 2004.
- Myers, Fred R. *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*. School of American Research Press, 2001.
- Natcharian, Lisa. "If Only Our Education System Was Run like American Idol." *masslive.com*. Accessed November 20, 2017. http://blog.masslive.com/real_learning/2010/04/if_only_our_education_system_was_run_like_american_idol.html.
- Nathanson, Yale S. "The Musical Ability of the Negro." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140, no. 1 (November 1, 1928): 186–90.
- Nettl, Bruno. *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music*. University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- . "Music." *Grove Music Online*, 2001. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.
- . *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*. University of Illinois Press, 2005.
- "New York Times Refutes Mark O'Connor's Accusations Against Suzuki." *Violinist.com*. Accessed June 28, 2018. <http://www.violinist.com/blog/laurie/201412/16434/>.
- Newcomb, Horace, and Lambdin Kay Distinguished Professor for the Peabody Awards Horace Newcomb. *Encyclopedia of Television*. Routledge, 2014.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, Alexander Tille, and William August Haussmann. *A Genealogy of Morals*. Macmillan, 1897.
- Noll, Steven, and James Trent. *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*. NYU Press, 2004.
- Norman, Russell. "Episode 102." *America's Got Talent*. NBC Television, June 28, 2006.
- . "Episode 901." *America's Got Talent*. NBC Television, May 27, 2014.
- "NSGT - About the Society." Accessed June 1, 2016. <http://www.nsgt.org/about-the-society/>.
- O'Connell, Deirdre. *The Ballad of Blind Tom*. Overlook Duckworth, 2009.
- O'Connor, Mark. "KLINGLER Rejects SUZUKI as His Student in 1923," 2015. <http://markoconnorblog.blogspot.com/2013/09/suzuki-klingler-not-what-you-expected.html>.

- . “Mark O’Connor Manifesto: A Reemerging American Classical Music,” 2010.
<http://www.oconnormethod.com/AcademicDocs.html>.
- Olszewski-Kubilius, Paula, Lisa Limburg-Weber, and Steven Pfeiffer. *Early Gifts: Recognizing and Nurturing Children’s Talents*. Prufrock Press Inc., 2003.
- Ortner, Sherry B. “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (January 1995): 173–93.
- Oscar Teale. “Aesthetic Magic.” *Magic, Unity, Might: Society of American Magicians Monthly*, February 1918.
- Ottolengui, Daniel. “Poor Tom: Inside Facts About the World Famous Colored Musical Prodigy.” *Tacoma News*, October 29, 1898.
- Pearlman, Steven. “Meaning Making and Making Meaning Meaningful: The Relationship Between Language and Thought in Critical Pedagogy.” *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 5, no. 2 (October 13, 2014).
- Pereira, Carlos Silva, João Teixeira, Patrícia Figueiredo, João Xavier, São Luís Castro, and Elvira Brattico. “Music and Emotions in the Brain: Familiarity Matters.” *PLOS ONE* 6, no. 11 (November 16, 2011): e27241.
- Pfefferman, Richard. *Strategic Reinvention in Popular Culture: The Encore Impulse*. Springer, 2013.
- Plato, and Allan David Bloom. *The Republic of Plato*. Basic Books, 1991.
- Popenoe, Paul. “The Inheritance of Artistic Talents.” *Journal of Heredity* 20, no. 9 (September 1929): 415.
- Radano, Ronald Michael. *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Raftery, Brian. *Don’t Stop Believin’: How Karaoke Conquered the World and Changed My Life*. Da Capo Press, 2008.
- Rankine, William John. “On the General Law of the Transformation of Energy.” *Philosophical Magazine Series 4* 5, no. 30 (February 1, 1853): 106–17.
- “Reality.” Accessed November 16, 2017. <https://whipchick.livejournal.com/12805.html>.
- Reckmeyer, Mary. *Strengths Based Parenting: Developing Your Children’s Innate Talents*. Gallup Press, 2016.
- Regan, Andre T. *The Last Legal Slave in America*. Documentary, Short, 2006.
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0823648/>.
- Reiss, Benjamin. *The Showman and the Slave*. Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Rice, Timothy. *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction*. OUP USA, 2014.
- . *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.

- Robertson, Ian. *Mind Sculpture: Your Brain's Untapped Potential*. Transworld, 2011.
- Robinson, Ken, and Lou Aronica. *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*. Penguin, 2009.
- Roche, Linda De. *The Jazz Age: A Historical Exploration of Literature*. ABC-CLIO, 2015.
- Rollefson, J. Griffith. *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Roper, Jenny. "What Do We Mean When We Talk about Talent?" *HR*, June 15, 2015.
- Ross, Pat O'Connell. "National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent." Washington, D.C., 1993.
- Rothkopf, Joanna. "I Auditioned for America's Got Talent to Find Out If I've Got Talent." Jezebel. Accessed March 8, 2018. <https://jezebel.com/i-auditioned-for-americas-got-talent-to-find-out-if-ive-1792364306>.
- Rowden, Terry. *The Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness*. University of Michigan Press, 2009.
- Ruddock, Eve, and Samuel Leong. "'I Am Unmusical!': The Verdict of Self-Judgement." *International Journal of Music Education* 23, no. 1 (April 1, 2005): 9–22.
- Rushfield, Richard. *American Idol: The Untold Story*. Hachette Books, 2011.
- S. Tomkins, Silvan. "The Quest for Primary Motives: Biography and Autobiography of an Idea." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 41 (August 1, 1981): 306–29.
- Sacks, Oliver. *An Anthropologist on Mars*. Pan Macmillan, 2011.
- Sajjadi, Seyed Hossein, F. Gillian Rejskind, and Bruce M. Shore. "Is Multipotentiality a Problem or Not? A New Look at the Data." *High Ability Studies* 12, no. 1 (June 1, 2001): 27–43.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Open Road Media, 2012.
- Schalk, Sami. "Reevaluating the Supercrip." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 10, no. 1 (February 24, 2016): 71–86.
- Schenbeck, Lawrence. *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943*. Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2012.
- Schmidt, Barbara. "Archangels Unaware: The Story of Thomas Bethune Also Known as Thomas Wiggins Also Known as 'Blind Tom' (1849 - 1908)." Accessed May 27, 2018. <http://www.twainquotes.com/archangels.html>.
- Schoenberg, Arnold. *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*. University of California Press, 1975.
- Schonberg, Harold C. *The Lives of the Great Composers*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*. Clarendon Press, 1974.
- . *The Art of Literature*. Macmillan and Company, 1910.
- . *The World as Will and Representation*. Courier Corporation, 2012.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, and E. F. J. Payne. *The World as Will and Representation*. Courier Corporation, 1966.
- Scott Barry Kaufman, Angela L. Duckworth. “World-Class Expertise: A Developmental Model.” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, 2015.
- Scripp, Lawrence, Devin Ulibarri, and Robert Flax. “Thinking Beyond the Myths and Misconceptions of Talent: Creating Music Education Policy That Advances Music’s Essential Contribution to Twenty-First-Century Teaching and Learning.” *Arts Education Policy Review* 114, no. 2 (January 1, 2013): 54–102.
- Seashore, C. E. “The Inheritance of Musical Talent.” *The Musical Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1920): 586–98.
- Seashore, Carl Emil. *The Measurement of Musical Talent*. G. Schirmer, 1915.
- . *The Psychology of Musical Talent*. Silver, Burdett, 1919.
- Seeger, Anthony. *Why Suyá Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People*. University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Sefton-Green, Julian, Pat Thomson, Ken Jones, and Liora Bresler. *The Routledge International Handbook of Creative Learning*. Routledge, 2011.
- Seguin, E. C. *New Facts and Remarks Concerning Idiocy*. Wm. Wood & Company, 1870.
- Sergo, Peter. “Experts Criticize Scientific Basis Of Malcolm Gladwell’s Dyslexia Argument.” *Medical Daily*, October 29, 2013. <https://www.medicaldaily.com/malcolm-gladwells-david-and-goliath-experts-criticize-scientific-basis-his-dyslexia-argument-261257>.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Penguin Books, 1959.
- Shea, Erin. “How Judges Pick the Winners at a Dog Show; Judges Explain Their Thought Process.” *American Kennel Club*. Accessed March 13, 2018. <http://www.akc.org/content/dog-shows/articles/how-judges-pick-the-winners-at-a-dog-show/>.
- Shenk, David. *The Genius in All of Us: New Insights Into Genetics, Talent, and IQ*. Anchor Books, 2011.
- Shepherd, John. *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World: Volume II: Performance and Production*. A&C Black, 2003.
- Shewfelt, Steven, Meredith Aska McBride, Jenny Nagaoka, Camille Farrington, Joseph Maurer, and Lindsay J. Wright. “Arts Education and Socio-Emotional Learning Outcomes among K-12 Students: Developing a Theory of Action.” White paper. Ingenuity, Forthcoming.

- “Shinichi Suzuki.” Suzuki Association of the Americas. Accessed April 7, 2016.
<https://suzukiassociation.org/about/suzuki-method/shinichi-suzuki/>.
- Sloboda, John A. “Music Structure and Emotional Response: Some Empirical Findings.” *Psychology of Music* 19, no. 2 (October 1, 1991): 110–20.
- Small, Christopher. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Wesleyan University Press, 2011.
- Smart, Bradford D. *Topgrading: How Leading Companies Win by Hiring, Coaching, and Keeping the Best People*. Penguin, 2005.
- Solomon, Andrew. “Would You Wish This On Your Child?” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 4, 2012.
- “Some Jawn About ‘Jawn.’” *Miriam-Webster Blog* (blog). Accessed July 19, 2018.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/jawn-meaning-origin>.
- Southall, Geneva. “Blind Tom: A Misrepresented and Neglected Composer-Pianist.” *The Black Perspective in Music* 3, no. 2 (1975): 141–59.
- Southall, Geneva Handy. *Blind Tom, the Black Pianist-Composer (1849-1908): Continually Enslaved*. Scarecrow Press, 2002.
- Spence, Lester K. *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*. Punctum Books, 2015.
- Spencer, Herbert. *First Principles*. D. Appleton and Company, 1864.
- Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81.
- Stark, Lauren. “Naming Giftedness: Whiteness and Ability Discourse in US Schools.” *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 24, no. 4 (December 2014): 394.
- Sterling, Christopher H. *Encyclopedia of Radio*. Routledge, 2004.
- Sternberg, Constantin von. “The Dull Pupil.” *The Etude* 15, no. 1 (April 1897): 101.
- Sternberg, Robert J. *Handbook of Creativity*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Sternberg, Robert J., Linda Jarvin, and Elena L. Grigorenko. *Explorations in Giftedness*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Stormonth, James. *Etymological and Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language, Including a Very Copious Selection of Scientific Terms for Use in Schools and Colleges and as a Book of General Reference*. Edinburgh, W. Blackwood, 1881.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. J. Cassell, 1852.

- Straus, Joseph. "Idiots Savants, Retarded Savants, Talented Aments, Mono-Savants, Autistic Savants, Just Plain Savants, People with Savant Syndrome, and Autistic People Who Are Good at Things: A View from Disability Studies." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (June 4, 2014). <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3407>.
- Straus, Joseph N. *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Streib, Jessi. "Class Reproduction by Four Year Olds." *Qualitative Sociology* 34, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 337.
- Suzuki, Dr Shinichi, and Mary Louise Nagata. *Ability Development from Age Zero*. Alfred Music, 2014.
- Suzuki, Shinichi, and Waltraud Suzuki. *Nurtured by Love: The Classic Approach to Talent Education*. Alfred Music, 1983.
- "Suzuki's BIGGEST Lie." Accessed September 8, 2017. <http://markoconnorblog.blogspot.com/2014/10/suzukis-biggest-lie.html>.
- Swyer, Shaidornell. *How You Can Discover Your Talent and Transform Your Life: The First and Only Book of Its Kind in World Literary History!* Notion Press, 2018.
- "Talent." Online Dictionary. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/talent>.
- "'Talent Education' Expands Throughout the World." Accessed September 5, 2017. http://www.suzukimethod.or.jp/english/E_mthd121.html.
- Taussig, Michael T. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. Psychology Press, 1993.
- "Ten Years of 'American Idol' Chart Dominance: Clarkson, Underwood, Daughtry, Fantasia, More | Billboard." Accessed April 12, 2018. <https://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1093819/ten-years-of-american-idol-chart-dominance-clarkson-underwood-daughtry>.
- Terman, Lewis Madison. *Genetic Studies of Genius ...: Mental and Physical Traits of a Thousand Gifted Children, by L. M. Terman, Assisted by B. T. Baldwin, Edith Bronson, and Others*. Stanford University Press, 1925.
- . *Genetic Studies of Genius ...: The Gifted Child Grows up; Twenty-Five Years' Follow-up of a Superior Group, by L. M. Terman and M. H. Oden*. Stanford University Press, 1947.
- . *The Measurement of Intelligence: An Explanation of and a Complete Guide for the Use of the Stanford Revision and Extension of the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale*. Houghton Mifflin, 1916.
- "The Blind Black Boy Pianist." *Dwight's Journal of Music* 17, no. 26 (September 22, 1860).
- "The Formation of the Mark O Connor Fiddle Camps." Accessed September 14, 2017. <http://markoconnorblog.blogspot.com/2016/12/the-formation-of-mark-o-connor-fiddle.html>.

- “The Great Star of the Musical World, and the Prodigy of the Age, Tom.” *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer*, October 20, 1857, sec. Amusements.
- The Marvelous Musical Prodigy, Blind Tom, the Negro Boy Pianist*. New York: Tower, Gildersleeve & Co., 1867.
- The New Yorker*. Vol. 11. F-R Publishing Corporation, 1935.
- “The Parables of Kingdom of God: Rev. Dr. D. H. Rolston Preaches Forceful Sermon on Parable of the Talents. The Application Made. The Christian’s Duty Today Is That of Utilizing and Realizing on Talents Committed to Him.” *Charlotte Daily Observer*, March 27, 1916.
- “The Remarkable Case of the Late ‘Blind Tom’: How an Imbecile Blind Negro Pianist Amazed Scientists and Musicians the World Over.” *The Etude* 26, no. 8 (August 1908): 532.
- “‘Tom’ the Musical Wonder.” *The Baltimore Sun*, June 27, 1860, Vol. XLVII edition, sec. Page 1.
- “Transforming Boston’s Untapped Talent into Mini Maestros.” *PBS NewsHour* (blog). Accessed August 15, 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/transforming-bostons-untapped-talent-mini-maestros/>.
- Trent, James W. *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Trotter, James M. *Music and Some Highly Musical People*. Johnson Reprint, 1881.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press, 1995.
- Türken, Salman, Hilde Eileen Nafstad, Rolv Mikkel Blakar, and Katrina Roen. “Making Sense of Neoliberal Subjectivity: A Discourse Analysis of Media Language on Self-Development.” *Globalizations* 13, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 32–46.
- Turner, Graeme. *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*. SAGE Publications, 2010.
- Tutein, Anna Amalie. “The Phenomenon of ‘Blind Tom’: The Most Remarkable Instance of the Operation of the Sub-Conscious Mind in Music.” *The Etude*, February 1918.
- Twain, Mark. “Blind Tom and His Performances.” *San Francisco Alta California*, August 1, 1869.
- . “Letter from Mark Twain: Blind Tom and His Performances.” *Daily Alta California*, August 1, 1869.
- “TWINKLE, TWINKLE, LITTLE CABBAGE.” Accessed August 24, 2017. <http://markoconnorblog.blogspot.com/2012/07/twinkle-twinkle-little-cabbage.html>.
- “US Inflation Calculator.” US Inflation Calculator. Accessed June 27, 2018. <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>.

- Vey, Shauna. *Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre: The Work of the Marsh Troupe of Juvenile Actors*. SIU Press, 2015.
- Vilches, Kassey. “7 Inspiring Reasons Why You Should Use Your Talents or Gifts.” *Medium* (blog), August 16, 2017. <https://medium.com/thrive-global/7-inspiring-reasons-why-you-should-use-your-talents-or-gifts-79d5063d4c4e>.
- Vinkhuyzen, Anna A. E., Sophie van der Sluis, Danielle Posthuma, and Dorret I. Boomsma. “The Heritability of Aptitude and Exceptional Talent Across Different Domains in Adolescents and Young Adults.” *Behavior Genetics* 39, no. 4 (July 2009): 380–92.
- W. “From a Spiritualist, Boston, Nov. 13, 1862.” *Dwight’s Journal of Music* 21 (November 22, 1862): 267–68.
- Wang, Dan. “Scenes of Feeling: Music and the Imagination of the Liberal Subject.” Ph.D., University of Chicago, 2017.
- Wang, Grace. *Soundtracks of Asian America: Navigating Race through Musical Performance*. Duke University Press, 2014.
- Wartberg, Kerstin. “Shinichi Suzuki: Pionier Der Musikerziehung.” Deutsches Suzuki Institut, 2009.
- Watson, John Broadus. *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist*. Lippincott, 1919.
- Watterson, Henry. “Blind Tom.” *Courier-Journal*. June 16, 1908.
- Webster, Noah. *A Dictionary of the English Language*. Vol. 2. 2 vols. London: Black, Young, and Young, 1828.
- Webster, Noah, and William Greenleaf Webster. *A Primary-School Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language*. J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1857.
- Wegwert, Joseph, and Aiden Charles. “Niceness and the Reproduction of Inequity: The Perfect Storm of Whiteness, Middle-Classness, and Cis-Femaleness in School Contexts.” In *A Culture of Nice: How Educators’ Niceness Holds Inequities in Place*. New York City, 2018.
- Wei, Junhow. “‘I’m the Next American Idol’: Cooling Out, Accounts, and Perseverance at Reality Talent Show Auditions.” *Symbolic Interaction* 39, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 3–25.
- Westwood, Peter S. *What Teachers Need to Know about Teaching Methods*. Australian Council for Education Research, 2008.
- “What Is SEL?” Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Accessed June 18, 2018. <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>.
- Wheelock Stahl, Matthew. “A Moment Like This: American Idol and Narratives of Meritocracy.” In *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, 212–32. Psychology Press, 2004.
- Wiesel, H. J. “Blind Tom.” *Dwight’s Journal of Music* 22, no. 17 (January 24, 1863): 340–41.

- Wiley, Pamela. *Violin Playing in the American Music System*. Pluff Mudd Publications, 2015.
- Williamson, Colin. *Hidden in Plain Sight: An Archaeology of Magic and the Cinema*. Rutgers University Press, 2015.
- Wilson, John Paul, Kurt Hugenberg, and Nicholas O. Rule. "Racial Bias in Judgments of Physical Size and Formidability: From Size to Threat." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 1 (July 2017): 59–80.
- Winner, Ellen. "Child Prodigies and Adult Genius: A Weak Link." In *The Wiley Handbook of Genius*, 297–320. Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- Wong, Deborah. *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*. Routledge, 2004.
- "Word Frequency: Based on 450 Million Word COCA Corpus." Accessed June 9, 2018. <https://www.wordfrequency.info/free.asp?s=y>.
- Yamada, Makiko, Lucina Q. Uddin, Hidehiko Takahashi, Yasuyuki Kimura, Keisuke Takahata, Ririko Kousa, Yoko Ikoma, et al. "Superiority Illusion Arises from Resting-State Brain Networks Modulated by Dopamine." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 11 (March 12, 2013): 4363–67.
- Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.
- Yont, Rose. *Status and Value of Music in Education*. Woodruff Press, 1916.
- Yoshihara, Mari. *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music*. Temple University Press, 2008.
- Young, Edward, and Samuel Richardson. *Conjectures on Original Composition: In a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison*. A. Millar and R. and J. Dodsley, 1759.
- Young, Michael. *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Transaction Publishers, 2011.
- Zalla, Tiziana, David Miele, Marion Leboyer, and Janet Metcalfe. "Metacognition of Agency and Theory of Mind in Adults with High Functioning Autism." *Consciousness and Cognition* 31 (January 2015): 126–38.
- Zatorre, Robert J. "Absolute Pitch: A Model for Understanding the Influence of Genes and Development on Neural and Cognitive Function." *Nature Neuroscience* 6, no. 7 (July 2003): 692–95.
- Zhou, Xun, and Francesca Tarocco. *Karaoke: The Global Phenomenon*. Reaktion Books, 2013.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Mapping Ideology*. Verso Books, 2012.