

## Faryl Smith: Too much, too young?

She's music's latest teen sensation – but life isn't easy for child prodigies, warns Jessica Duchen

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It's sad when the first thought that strikes one upon encountering a young girl with a beautiful voice is: "Oh God, another one." The girl in question is Faryl Smith, 13, the latest discovery of Britain's Got Talent. She led the singing at the England-France rugby union match in front of more than 82,000 people, and her first album, *Faryl*, sold 20,000 copies in its first four days, becoming the fastest-selling "classical" debut album ever.

A confident girl from Kettering, she has a strong mezzo-soprano voice, the personal support of Katherine Jenkins, a recording contract with Universal, and the hearts of the television-addicted nation desperate for a new pseudo-classical child star; the others keep growing up. The fact that most singers don't generally find their "true" voice until they are nearly 20 seems negligible: what commands the country's fickle affections is a kid creating the illusion of, so to speak, premature maturity.

There's always a buzz when a prodigy emerges, and Faryl is no exception. Singing "Ave Maria" on Britain's Got Talent last year, she stunned everyone with the purity and assurance of her voice. Judge Simon Cowell said that she had sung "the best audition I've heard in years". She then caused a sensation by not winning – first prize went to a breakdancer. Universal gave her a contract anyway, reportedly worth £2.3m. In *Classic FM* magazine, Faryl commented: "People think when you sign a contract you're automatically given a barrel of money, but that's not how it happens. I just let my mum and dad get on with it."

She's already being called an "opera singer", though, of course, she isn't one – she's way too young, and the tracks on her debut album include "Amazing Grace", "Danny Boy" and "Annie's Song", but no opera. Most interviews declare that she doesn't listen to classical music. They also report that Faryl's parents, a health-and-safety inspector and a hairdresser, were reluctant to let her enter the television competition in case it would "ruin her childhood".

By now we should be used to stories that begin this way. Youngster emerges, catches attention with youthful appeal, achieves massive success. Half-baked "classical" pretensions are quickly abandoned in favour of mass-market pop, the real classical music world being small, lacking in money and too quality-driven. Sooner or later, the pressures tell in drugs, alcohol, mental problems or family feuds. Some genuine sensations bounce back. Some don't. History tells us that child prodigies pay for their successes with their souls.

Researching prodigies for my novels *Alicia's Gift* and *Hungarian Dances*, I met numerous youthful performers and read about five times as many. Throughout, there were sorry tales and few happy endings. In my books – *Alicia's Gift* concerning a prodigy pianist in the Peak District, and *Hungarian Dances* tracing the personal cost at which a Gypsy violinist rejects her heritage – I tried to give a compassionate picture of the human dilemmas involved in developing exceptional talent. The reality, though, is often less compassionate than one would like.

Plenty of great classical musicians started out as prodigies, the obvious examples being Mozart and Mendelssohn. The latter, though, seems to be the only prodigy in history whose family had nothing to gain from his status. Mozart's father was more typical: desperately ambitious, not just for musical glory, but for money. Through the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, prodigies frequently appeared in deprived or persecuted communities in which musical success was viewed as an escape route to a better, safer and wealthier life. The legendary violinist Jascha Heifetz came from the Vilna Ghetto; the pianist Gyorgy Cziffra, like my *Hungarian Dances* heroine Mimi Racz, from grinding poverty among the Hungarian Gypsies.

Today it's not necessity that drives the push, but it is sometimes greed. Every prodigy denies having pushy parents. Every parent of a prodigy denies pushing them. Encouraging, yes, they all say; supporting, yes, pushy, no. But the fact remains that behind every child basking prematurely in the limelight there is an adult who has put them there. Children cannot and do not do such things all by themselves.

Over many successful young musicians, especially the girls, there looms an ever-watchful parent – cellist Ofra Harnoy and violinists Sarah Chang and Hilary Hahn are just three examples. Sometimes the parent takes control of management and even recording production. Pop violinist Vanessa-Mae's mother founded a record label for her daughter when the little violinist was barely 10. In certain cases, terrible family rifts ensue when a girl musician grows up and wants either to take control of things herself, or to hand them over to an experienced music professional.

Boys can seem more resilient than girls, perhaps because they aren't generally exploited for their looks. Nobody took a photograph of Daniel Barenboim walking

out of the sea in a wet T-shirt when he was 14, unlike with Vanessa-Mae, or draped him suggestively over a couch, unlike with Harnoy. Today one of Britain's most exciting talents, the teenage pianist Benjamin Grosvenor (who won the piano section of the BBC Young Musician of the Year aged 11), is building a serious career slowly and steadily; ditto the clarinettist Julian Bliss, now 19.

But overexposed young men sometimes respond to prodigy childhoods by suffering injury, disillusionment or mental illness just when they should be at the peak of their powers. Maxim Vengerov's recent defection from the violin is a relatively mild example. Worse was the case of Josef Hassid (1923-1950), a phenomenal violin prodigy who suffered a breakdown at 18 and died aged 26 after a lobotomy; and the pianist Terence Judd, winner of the 1978 Tchaikovsky Competition, who leapt to his death at Beachy Head, Sussex.

The survivors are brave, often admirable. The Japanese violinist Midori, who was internationally celebrated by 11, now devotes much of her time to education and community work, bringing music to underprivileged children. Barenboim is one of today's greatest musicians and thinkers. Even Charlotte Church seems to have settled down for now.

One could argue that there is no guarantee of happiness or success for anybody, prodigy or otherwise; that you have to grab the chances while you can; that failing to push a special talent would deny it its opportunities and the world its beauties. Prodigy parents might do well to reflect before accepting the record contract, though. Nobody can emerge wholly unscathed from such a childhood. It isn't humanly possible.

Early risers: when a star is born

Anne-Sophie Mutter

The violinist was championed as a teenager by the conductor Herbert von Karajan. Now 45, performs and records repertoire such as the Beethoven and Tchaikovsky concertos in 'extreme' interpretations. Marriage to conductor André Previn ended in divorce. Reported to be considering retirement.

Charlotte Church

Launching with 'Voice of an Angel' before her teens, Church (right) started off as a sub-classical baby doll. Moved on to pop, was then reported as binge drinking in 2005. Gave up alcohol when pregnant with first child. Now 23 and hosts own TV show.

Daniel Barenboim

Barenboim was giving concerts by 11 and quickly became an international star as both pianist and conductor. His dedication to the quality and power of top-notch classical-music-making has never faltered.

Vanessa-Mae

Started off as a classical violinist, promoted by her mother's record label. Signed by EMI aged 14 and turned quickly towards mainstream pop. Her website currently lists one forthcoming gig, at Westonbirt Arboretum in July.

David Helfgott

The Australian pianist was much pushed by his ambitious father, but showed signs of mental illness while a student. After first marriage broke down he was institutionalised and underwent treatment for a decade. His story was immortalised in the film 'Shine'.