

*Reflections of a Would-Have-Been Wunderkind—Connor Harris*

Young children usually have pretty outlandish life goals. If you ask typical fifth-graders their career aims, you'll probably hear "astronaut," "spy" and "Major League Baseball player" far more often than, say, "accountant" or "Wal-Mart greeter." I was a weird, friendless fifth-grader, but I was hardly immune to fantastic ambitions. In fact, mine was probably the most fantastic of any of my classmates: to be the greatest musical child prodigy since Mozart.

When I was in fifth grade, I thought classical music was the only sort worth listening to, and I enjoyed making up improvisations on the piano. When I told my parents that I wanted to start writing my own pieces, they humored me enough to buy me a copy of score-writing software.

I had only a smattering of training in music theory. My beginning piano books included basic lessons interspersed between such masterpieces as "Tiger Hunt" and "The Little Red Drum." I knew basic uses of chords from a few books that I had stumbled across, and I knew that most melodies could be harmonized with parallel thirds. You've probably heard the "Flower Duet" from Léo Delibes' opera *Lakmé*—(*Play a ten-second excerpt.*) The melody there (*play a one-measure fragment*) is set above the same melody, but with the pitches all moved down by the same distance (*play another one-measure fragment*). It's an easy way to create harmony parts, so I used it all the time. But that smattering was about it; the rest I had to figure out, if ever, by trial and error. I knew that there were other rules of classical composition—though I didn't know what they were—but if the great modern composers rarely followed them, why should I?

The parallel-thirds trick earned me my first triumph. At the fifth-grade orchestra recital, before an enthusiastic audience of my parents and my classmates' parents, I played an original sixteen-measure viola duet called "Sunset." (The title, I said, was because "it reminded me of the sunset.") I gradually acquired the confidence, if not the competence, to try increasingly complex projects: a few songs; an unfinished symphony based on a Christmas carol medley; even an attempt at an opera whose protagonist was an industrialist in the Gilded Age. The libretto, which I wrote myself based on my seventh-grade understanding of history and poetics, shows perfectly why musicians—especially thirteen-year-old musicians—don't always make good poets. The protagonist's opening verse, for example, is this: (*playing piano and singing*) *The year is nineteen hundred five, and I can say / I thank the Lord for my living every day. / The Lord has laid the entire blasted world at my feet / Like a canapé on a silver platter that I pick up and eat.*

But most hubristic of all was my attempt to finish Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*. A *fugue* is a short piece based on one short melody which appears transformed and combined with itself and other melodies in all sorts of clever ways. Fugues have many strict rules and guidelines, and writing a good simple one is hard even with years of education. *The Art of the Fugue* was Bach's attempt to sum up the technique of fugue writing. It contains

thirteen fugues all on the same one subject, and a fourteenth fugue, unfinished, with four subjects.

When I heard of Bach's great unfinished fugue—never mind that I scarcely knew what a fugue was—I decided that I just *had* to try to finish it.

I opened up a new score on the computer, and even before I had input a single note, I wrote at the top, "Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), completed by Connor Harris (b. 1994)." I worked for hours, imitating superficial aspects of Bach's style, cutting-and-pasting, parallel-thirdsing, and when something didn't sound right, moving notes around by experiment until it kinda sorta did.

The result wasn't as horrid as you might have expected—hours of trial and error had smoothed over the worst bits. But it was clunky, uneven, and scarcely resembled a fugue—not surprising, as my attempt to finish a fugue without ever having studied fugues was like trying to translate *Ulysses* into Japanese after watching a season of subtitled anime.

When I showed it to my music teacher, he told me politely that however good I thought I was, I wasn't good enough to have my name listed next to Bach's.

Thus died my dreams of being an untutored child genius. Eventually, I decided to learn what I was doing and force myself through the rigor of textbook exercises. And I came to learn that there really are no untutored geniuses. The film *Amadeus* may have portrayed Mozart as some half-divine figure who took dictation from God; but however much Mozart owed to God, he owed as much or more to his father Leopold, the greatest Tiger Dad of eighteenth-century Europe, and he probably spent his early years doing the same exercises that beginning music students still do today. I'll never be a great child prodigy—I'm 20 years old, well above the mandatory retirement age—and I'll probably never deserve to have my name listed next to Bach's. But at least I know now that the old rules are there for a reason, and that while practice doesn't always make perfect, perfection always takes practice.