Producing Excellence: The Making of Virtuosos

Izabela Wagner
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Consider the violin virtuoso: in her late teens, Eastern European, humble beginnings, she performs in prestigious concert halls the world over, alone on stage, imperturbable, and beautiful too. Yes, it's also true that she was practicing for ninety minutes a day at age three, three hours at age six, and five hours by eight years old, at which time her parents stopped her general education to concentrate fully on music because a renowned violin master had agreed to take her on. Before the age of ten, her soloist career path hit its stride—a breathless, high-pressure schedule of daily practice, lessons, rehearsals, competitions, regular public appearances, and, presumably, sleep.

Such is life for the average prodigy, we learn in Producing Excellence: The Making of Virtuosos, Izabela Wagner's compelling examination of one hundred or so children pursuing violin greatness. Wagner’s own children were students in a soloist class in Paris in the early 1990s. She later kept ethnographic journals of that school, and observed in other classes in France, Germany, and Poland, as well as at eleven international competitions. More than twenty young students lived in her home over the years.

The emotional heart of this project is Wagner's numerous interviews with acclaimed violinists about all aspects of their lives in music, and especially the complicated parent-teacher relationships. To all those kids out there dreaming of reaching the highest levels of classical music fame, this book whispers be careful what you wish for.

MATT SUTHERLAND (Winter 2016)

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