Citation:

Printed: Thu, 10 Sep 2026

Edge, Dexter. 2015. "Samuel Wesley gives his opinion of Mozart's music (1781)." In: *Mozart: New Documents*, edited by Dexter Edge and David Black. First published 3 Dec 2015. [direct link]

Samuel Wesley gives his opinion of Mozart's music (1781)

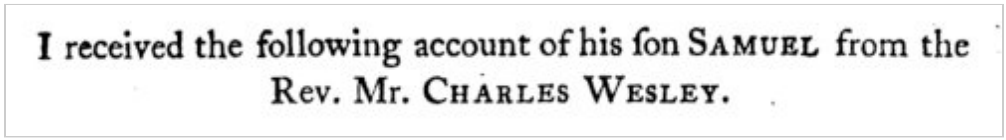
Dexter Edge

Daines Barrington, from "Account of Master Samuel Wesley," *Miscellanies*. London: J. Nichols, 1781

[291]

I received the following account of his son SAMUEL from the Rev. Mr. CHARLES WESLEY.

[...]

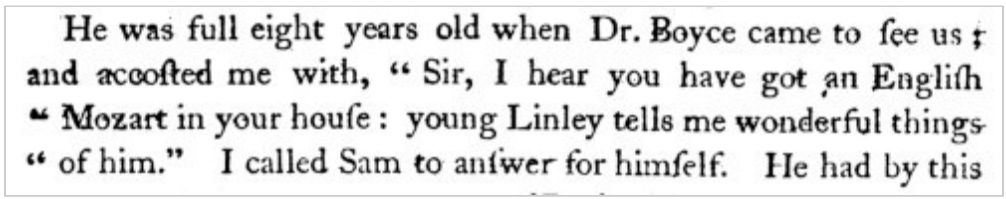


I received the following account of his ſon SAMUEL from the Rev. Mr. CHARLES WESLEY.

[293]

He was full eight years old when Dr. Boyce came to see us; and accosted me with, "Sir, I hear you have got an English "Mozart in your house: young Linley tells me wonderful things "of him." I called Sam to answer for himself.

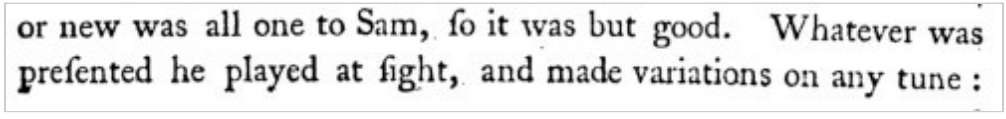
[...]



He was full eight years old when Dr. Boyce came to ſee us; and accoſted me with, "Sir, I hear you have got an Engliſh "Mozart in your houſe: young Linley tells me wonderful things "of him." I called Sam to anſwer for himſelf. He had by this

[295]

[...] Whatever was presented he [Sam] played at sight, and made variations on any tune:

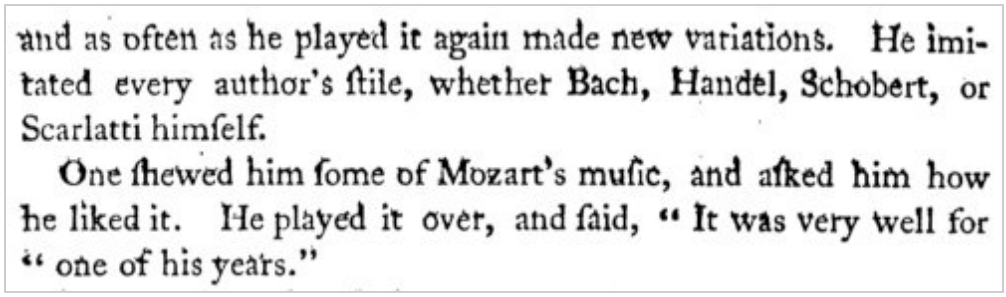


or new was all one to Sam, ſo it was but good. Whatever was preſented he played at ſight, and made variations on any tune:

Mozart: New Documents by Dexter Edge & David Black
is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

[296]
and as often as he played it again made new variations. He imitated every author's stile, whether Bach, Handel, Schobert, or Scarlatti himself.
One shewed him some of Mozart's music, and asked him how he liked it. He played it over, and said, "It was very well for "one of his years."

[...]


and as often as he played it again made new variations. He imitated every author's ſtile, whether Bach, Handel, Schobert, or Scarlatti himſelf.
One ſhewed him ſome of Mozart's muſic, and aſked him how he liked it. He played it over, and ſaid, "It was very well for "one of his years."

Commentary

The most famous report on the musical abilities of young Mozart was written by English lawyer and amateur antiquarian and naturalist Daines Barrington, based on observations and tests performed during his meeting with Wolfgang in June 1765, when the composer was nine years old (for a detailed discussion of Barrington's report and its background, see Cowgill 2000, 49ff). Barrington submitted his report, "Account of a very remarkable young musician," to the Royal Society in Nov 1769; it was read to the society in 1770, and published in the Society's *Philosophical Transactions* in 1771, six years after the encounter (Barrington 1771, transcribed in full in *Dokumente*, 86–92).

Less well known are Barrington's subsequent writings on four other musical prodigies: the brothers Charles and Samuel Wesley; William Crotch (1775–1847); and Garret Wesley, 1st Earl of Mornington (1735–1781). In 1781, Barrington published a collection of his papers under the title *Miscellanies*. This book includes a reprint of his article on Mozart (279–288), with a brief new postscript based on information provided by Charles Burney (288; *Dokumente*, 166). The reprint is followed by a new article on the Wesley brothers (289–310), followed in turn by one on Crotch and Mornington (311–325).

The two references to Mozart appear in an extended report on Samuel Wesley that Barrington received from the boys' father, Charles Wesley senior. Neither reference appears in *Dokumente* or its supplements; both are quoted in Philip Olleson's biography of Samuel Wesley (Olleson 2003, 10 and 15). They also readily turn up in a search on Google Books.

The musical prodigies Charles Wesley junior (1757–1834) and Samuel Wesley (1766–1837) were sons of Charles Wesley (1707–1788), the "principal poet and hymn-writer of Methodism" (Olleson 2003, 1). John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of Methodism, was their uncle. Barrington's article on the Wesley brothers in *Miscellanies* begins with a relatively brief description of Charles junior written by Charles senior (289–290); but the larger part of the article (291–310) is devoted to the extraordinary talents of Samuel. The first few pages on Samuel likewise consist of a report by Charles senior (291–298), covering the boy's life from the age of three, when his father first became aware of his musical talents, to the time that Barrington first met him in 1775. The remainder of the article consists of Barrington's report of his own observations and tests of Samuel's abilities, and it closes with Samuel's setting of a ballad text by the young Thomas Percy (b. 1768), "Autumnus comes with sickly brow," which Barrington had given to Samuel to compose as an impromptu test (on Percy, see Barrington 1781, 308, note n).

Both references to Mozart appear in the report on Samuel Wesley provided by Charles senior. The first concerns a visit to the Wesley home by prominent English composer William Boyce (1710–1779) when Samuel was 8, thus most likely in 1774. Boyce is reported to have exclaimed upon entering: "Sir, I hear you have got an English Mozart in your house: young Linley tells me wonderful things of him." The reference is to Thomas Linley the younger (1756–1778), a student of Boyce and himself a prodigy, who had become close friends with Mozart when the two met in Florence in 1770. There seems to be no known evidence that Boyce himself met or heard Mozart in 1764 or 1765; Boyce's name does not appear in Leopold Mozart's long list of notable people that the Mozarts encountered during their sojourn in England (*Briefe*, i:192–98). But Leopold's list does not include every person they are known to have met; Cowgill (2000, 66) notes, for example, that the name of Charles Burney is absent from Leopold's list, even though we have Burney's own testimony of his meeting with Wolfgang. Nor, for that matter, does Barrington's name appear on the list (on this point, see Cowgill 2000, 50). So we cannot rule out that Boyce might have met Wolfgang and heard him perform, and that Leopold simply didn't mention it.

Samuel's age at the time of the second anecdote is unclear, but the surrounding context suggests that it likewise took place in 1774, when Samuel was 8. In any case, the anecdote seems certainly to date from before Barrington's first meeting with Samuel in 1775. An unnamed visitor shows Samuel music by Mozart; when asked his opinion of Mozart's music, Samuel states that it is "very well for one of [Mozart's] years."

It is unclear what music by Mozart might have been shown to Samuel in 1774. Wolfgang's first two publications—both consisting of pairs of sonatas for keyboard and violin (K. 6 and 7, as opus 1, and K. 8 and 9, as opus 2)—were published in Paris in 1764 (see the entries for 5 Mar 1764 and 9 Apr 1764). Leopold Mozart brought the engraved plates for both editions with him to London in 1764, and produced a private printing of all four sonatas there, before passing on the plates to Bremner, who used them to produce his own printings of op. 1 and 2, adding his London imprint to the original title-pages (see Haberkamp 1986, i:67–68 and 71, and ii:3–4 and 7). One new edition appeared during the Mozarts' stay in London: Wolfgang's six sonatas for

keyboard and violin K. 10–15, dedicated to Queen Charlotte, published in 1764 (Haberkamp 1986, i:72–75, and ii:8–11).

Mozart's only other publications that might have found their way to London by 1774 were the variations K. 24 and K. 25, and the sonatas K. 26–31, all published in The Hague and Amsterdam in the spring of 1766. It seems unlikely that Mozart's songs, K. 52 and 53, published in Gräffer's *Neue Sammlung zum Vergnügen und Unterricht* in Vienna in 1768, would have been available in London. Mozart published nothing else until 1778 (the question of the possible manuscript circulation of Mozart's music in Britain prior to 1775 seems to have been little studied). No music by Mozart is known to have been performed in London between 1765 and 1784 (see Cowgill 2000, Appendix F, here esp. 292). All in all, then, it seems most likely that in 1774 Samuel Wesley would still have been shown Mozart's earliest publications from 1764 and 1765, when Wolfgang was eight and nine years old. That Samuel himself was eight at the time of his condescending judgment makes the anecdote all the more amusing.

John Russell, *Samuel Wesley as a Child, Composing*, 1777.
Museum of the Royal Academy of Music (accession no. 2003.1046)

Samuel's musical ear, memory, and powers of invention were by all accounts extraordinary. In the material provided to Barrington, Charles Wesley senior writes:

> He was between four and five years old when he got hold of [Handel's] oratorio Samson, and by that alone taught himself to read words, soon after he taught himself to write. [...]
>
> Before he could write he composed music. His custom was, to lay the words of an oratorio

> before him, and sing them all over. Thus he set (extempore for the most part) Ruth, Gideon, Manasses, and the Death of Abel. We observed, when he repeated the same words, it was always the same tunes. The airs of Ruth in particular he made before he was six years old, laid them up in his memory till he was eight, and then wrote them down. [Barrington, *Miscellanies*, 292–93]

Samuel Wesley’s autograph score of *Ruth* (1774) survives in the collection of the British Library (Add MS 34997).

Although he composed over 550 musical works (Olleson 2003, xii), Samuel’s later career was erratic, owing in part to symptoms that strongly suggest bipolar disorder (Olleson 2003, 3). Olleson succinctly summarizes Samuel’s later difficulties:

> This is a study of a supremely gifted musician and maverick. Samuel Wesley (1766–1837) was the son of the hymn writer Charles Wesley and nephew of the preacher John Wesley and the finest organist and composer of his generation, who despite prodigious musical talents and a privileged family background and education never achieved lasting fame or material success and died in poverty. Born and brought up in the heart of Methodism, he repudiated most of the values of his family and religious background in his adolescence and converted to Roman Catholicism. He contracted a spectacularly unhappy marriage and in time left his wife for his teenage servant, with whom he had no fewer than nine children. Despite chronic mental health problems and many interruptions to his career, he played an important part in England’s musical life for well over thirty years as a performer, composer, lecturer, journalist, teacher, entrepreneur, and champion of the music of J. S. Bach, and left a substantial legacy of compositions, in all genres except opera. [Olleson 2003, xi]

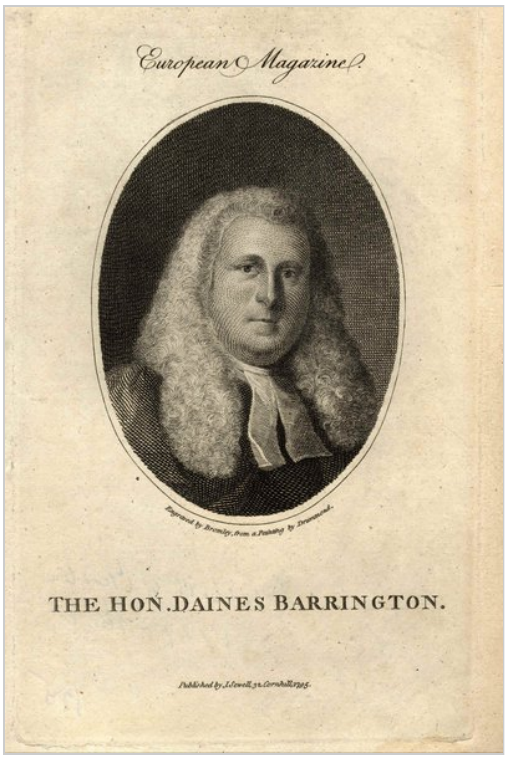
Daines Barrington (⇧)

Given the centrality of Barrington’s report to our current image of Mozart’s abilities as a child prodigy, it is surprising that Barrington himself has received little attention from Mozart scholars. Daines Barrington (1727–1800) was the fourth son of John Shute, first Viscount Barrington. He was called to the bar as a member of the Inner Temple in 1750, and subsequently held a number of offices and judgeships. He retired from all but one of his positions in 1785, retaining only that of Commissary-General of the Stores at Gibraltar, which paid a comfortable salary of £ 500 per annum.

Cowgill (2000, 49) describes Barrington as:

> … a gentleman scholar an[d] antiquary, keen amateur musician, scientist, and dedicated exponent of the eighteenth-century fascination for observing, ordering and classifying nature.

Less charitably, some of Barrington’s contemporaries viewed him as a dilettante who wrote (sometimes rather inaccurately) on a motley collection of topics.



Daines Barrington, 1795 engraving by William Bromley after Samuel Drummond.
(By permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London)

Barrington's first publication was *Observations on the Statutes (1766)*, considered in the nineteenth century his most lasting work. In 1773 he published a transcription (said to be none too accurate) of an Anglo-Saxon version (long attributed to King Alfred) of the *Historiae Adversus Paganus* of Orosius, along with an English translation (said to be rather poor). Two years later, he published *The Probability of Reaching the North Pole Discussed* (1775). He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society on 6 Apr 1767, and subsequently published 14 articles in the Society's *Philosophical Transactions* from 1767 until 1774. Barrington's report on Mozart was his fourth article in the *Philosophical Transactions*. The three articles preceding it give some notion of the diversity of his interests: "On Some Particular Fish Found in Wales" (1767); "An Investigation of the Difference between the Present Temperature of the Air in Italy and Some Other Countries, and What It Was Seventeen Centuries Ago" (1768); and "On the Trees Which are Supposed to be Indigenous in Great Britain" (1769). His article "Experiments and Observations on the Singing of Birds" appeared in the *Philosophical Transactions* in 1773; it remains notable as an early attempt at a scientific article on that topic. His final publication in *Philosophical Transactions* was "Of the Gillaroo Trout" (1774).

Barrington also became vice president of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and published 19 articles in the Society's journal *Archaeologia* between 1770 and 1789; another appeared posthumously in 1809. His first article in *Archaeologia* was "Observations on the Welsh Castles" (1770). Among his more notable publications in that journal was "On the Expiration of the Cornish Language" (1775), on Dolly Pentreath, whom Barrington believed (incorrectly, as it turned out) to be the last living native speaker of the Cornish language. Other articles by

Barrington in *Archaelogia* include "Some Account of Two Musical Instruments Used in Wales" (1775), "Observations on the Earliest Introduction of Clocks" (1779), "Observations on the Practice of Archery in England" (1785), "On the Progress of Gardening" (1785), "Observations on the Antiquity of Card-playing in England" (1787), and "An Historical Disquisition on the Game of Chess" (1789).

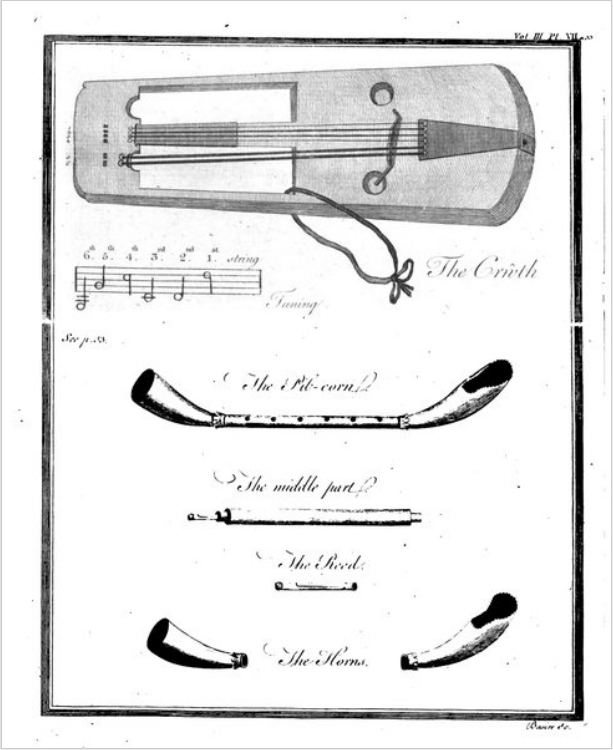


Illustration from Daines Barrington, "Some Account of Two Musical Instruments Used in Wales, *Archaeologia*, vol. 3, 1775, between pp. 32 and 33

In his article on Barrington in the first edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, George Paul Macdonnel drily wrote that his subject possessed:

> ... a mind of restless activity, which turned wide though not accurate learning to most ingenious uses. He was by no means free from the antiquarian's credulity. [Macdonnel 1885, 28]

Barrington's contemporary, the satirist Peter Pindar (the pen name of John Wolcot, 1738–1819) wittily skewered Barrington in his *Peter's Prophecy, or the President and Poet, or An Important Epistle to Sir J. Banks on the Approaching Election of a President of the Royal Society* (1788, 39–40):

> *[39]*
>
> SIR JOSEPH
>
> Pray, then what think ye of our famous DAINES?
>
> PETER
>
> *Think* of a man deny'd by Nature brains!

> Whose trash so oft the royal leaves disgraces:
> Who knows not jordans brown, from Roman vases!
>
> *[40]*
>
> About old pots his head for ever puzling,
> And boring earth, like pigs for troufles* muzling;
> Who likewise from old urns to crotchets leaps,
> Delights in music, and at concerts sleeps†.
>
> *[...]*
> * There are pigs kept expressly for hunting Troufles in some parts of England.
> † Such are the powers of somnolency over Mr. DAINES BARRINGTON, —at several of the Hanover-Square concerts hath the LYRIC PETER seen the ANTIQUARIAN in *seeming* musical speculation but verily employed in a most comfortable nap.

The potential effect of Barrington's mixed scholarly reputation on British Mozart reception remains to be investigated.

Notes (⇧)

Both references to Mozart are reproduced in Olleson 2003: pp. 10 ("English Mozart") and 15 ("very well for one of his years"). Boyce's comment is also included in Olleson's *Grove* article on Samuel Wesley (Olleson 2015). The original manuscripts of Charles Wesley's accounts of his sons survive in the Methodist Archives and Research Centre at the University of Manchester (MARC; research guide here), under the shelf marks DDCW 8/2, DDCW 8/24, and DDCW 10/2 (references as given in Olleson 2003, 4, note 10).

Boyce's comment, "an English Mozart," also appears in a manuscript reminiscence written by Samuel himself:

> Dr Boyce came to my father's house, and said to him, "Sir, I hear you have got an English Mozart in your house, Young Linley tells me wonderful things of him.
> [Cowgill 2000, 99, citing Samuel Wesley, "Reminiscences," British Library, Add. MS 27593, f. e32]

The wording in Samuel's reminiscence is identical to that given by Barrington, based on material provided by Samuel's father, suggesting that Samuel may have copied the anecdote from his father's papers, or perhaps directly from Barrington's article. Cowgill cites neither Barrington's article nor the papers of Charles Wesley senior.

Barrington's article on the Wesley brothers was also printed as "An Account of the Very Extraordinary Musical Talents of Messrs. Charles and Samuel Wesley," *The Westminster Magazine*, vol. 9, 233–36 (May

1781) and 289–95 (June 1781). Jackson (1849) reprints the article on the Wesley brothers, including both references to Mozart: ii:154 (the Boyce anecdote) and ii:156 (Samuel’s comment on Mozart’s music).

Miscellanies and its contents were listed in a number of contemporaneous periodicals; at least two reviews include additional commentary on the articles about Mozart, the Wesleys, and Crotch and Mornington. The most extensive (although basically still just a summary of the contents) is in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 51, 177; a shorter summary is given in *The Monthly Review*, vol. 65, 268.

Barrington’s articles in *Archaeologia* are behind a paywall at the site of Cambridge University Press, the current rights holder for the journal, which ceased publication in 1991. Each individual pdf at the CUP site costs $5.99. Links here are to the public domain copies of the relevant volumes on Google Books.

Bibliography (⇧)

Barrington, Daines. 1771. “Account of a Very Remarkable Young Musician.” *Philosophical Transactions*, vol. 60, 54–64.

Cowgill, Rachel Elizabeth. 2000. *Mozart’s Music in London: Aspects of Reception and Canonicity.* Ph.D. diss., University of London.

Haberkamp, Gertraut. 1986. *Die Erstdrucke der Werke von Wolfgang Amadeus Mozar*t. 2 vols. Musikbibliographische Arbeiten, edited by Rudolf Elvers, vol. 10. Tutzing: Hans Schneider.

Jackson, Thomas. 1849. *The Journal of The Rev. Charles Wesley, M. A., Sometime Student of Christ Church, Oxford.* 2 vols. London: John Mason. (vol. 2)

Kassler, Michael, and Philip Olleson. 2001. *Samuel Wesley (1766–1837): A Source Book.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Macdonell, George Paul. 1885. “Samuel Wesley.” *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Stephen. Vol. 3:286–288. London: Smith, Elder, & Co.

Olleson, Philip. 2003. *Samuel Wesley: The Man and His Music*. Woodbridge, UK; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press.

————. 2015. “Samuel Wesley.” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.* Oxford University Press, accessed 3 Oct 2015. [link (gated)]

Credit: Philip Olleson

Author: Dexter Edge

Link(s): Google Books (*Miscellanies*); Hathi (*The Westminster Magazine*, 1781, 233–36 and 289–95)

Search Term: mozarts

Source Library: ÖNB (*Miscellanies*); New York Public Library (*The Westminster Magazine*)

Categories: Reception

First Published: Thu, 3 Dec 2015

Citation:

> Edge, Dexter. 2015. “Samuel Wesley gives his opinion of Mozart’s music (1781).” In: *Mozart: New Documents*, edited by Dexter Edge and David Black. First published 3 Dec 2015. [direct link]