IN SEPTEMBER OF 1770, two 14-year-old boys met in Florence. One was Mozart, the other a young Englishman named Thomas Linley. According to Leopold Mozart, “the two boys performed one after the other throughout the whole evening, constantly embracing each other. On the following day the little Englishman, a most charming boy, had his violin brought to our rooms and played the whole afternoon, Wolfgang accompanying him on his own.” The next day, “these two boys played in turn the whole afternoon, not like boys, but like men!” Charles Burney met Linley in the same month and commented that “The Tommasino, as he is called, and the little Mozart, are talked of all over Italy, as the most promising geniuses of this age.” Mozart himself was later to remember Linley fondly, saying, “had he lived, he would have been one of the greatest ornaments of the musical world.” Rare praise, indeed; they say lightning never strikes twice, but it seems that here it did.

The boy that looks out at us from Gainsborough’s painting (Linley at 12 years old) was extraordinary: he played his first concerto at the age of seven in Bristol, began his studies in composition with Boyce at around the same time, and made his first London appearance at the age of 11 playing the part of Puck in a masque titled The Fairy Favour. The brightness in Linley’s eyes already suggests mischief, and it seems he was ideal for the role, impressing the reviewer for Lloyd’s Evening Post: “Nor can enough be said of the little boy, who plays the part of Puck; his singing, playing on the violin, and dancing the hornpipe, are all beyond expectations, and discovers extraordinary abilities.”

By 1768, the year of Gainsborough’s portrait, Linley had written six violin sonatas (only one of which survives) and later that year was in Florence studying violin with Nardini. He returned to England in 1771 and was concertmaster of the orchestra for the Drury Lane Theatre, composing 20 violin concertos (again, only one of which survives), the anthem Let God Arise (1773) for the Worcester Festival, incidental music for The Tempest, the remarkable A Lyric Ode on the Fairies, Aerial Beings and Witches of Shakespeare (1776), and, in collaboration with his father, music for Sheridan’s The Duenna (1775). The Lyric Ode in particular shows a strong Handelian influence, but the music also gives a sense of Linley’s emerging personal style. That style was not to develop beyond 1778: the Morning Chronicle on the 11th of August records that Linley, at the tender age of 22, “fell into a lake belonging to his Grace the Duke of Ancaster, at Grimsthorpe in Lincolnshire, and was unfortunately drowned; he remained under water full forty minutes, so that every effort made use of to restore him to life proved ineffectual.”

A tragic loss indeed, not only of human life, but also of possibilities. Where might Linley’s style have gone beyond 1778?
next? What might have come of another meeting with Mozart? Imagine a 35-year-old Linley attending Haydn’s London concerts and conversing with him, too. By all accounts this is the distinguished company, among the geniuses of the age, which Linley would have kept, the constellation in which his brightness would belong.

As there are no more facts about Linley’s life to be found, it might seem that such daydreams are all that is left to us, but his story is not all there is. Thomas was himself part of an extraordinary family. One story has it that a gentleman, having complimented Mr. Linley the Elder on his daughters’ musical talents, asked Thomas, “Are you musical, too, my little man?” To which the boy replied, “Oh yes, we’re all geniuses.” And he was not greatly exaggerating: Thomas Linley the Elder had a reputation for being the finest vocal teacher in the country and trained not only the young Thomas but all of his children, of whom the most accomplished was Elizabeth, seated next to Thomas in the Gainsborough portrait. Reading about the Linley family is like stumbling into the middle of a Jane Austen novel, and not only because the Linleys lived in Bath and performed at the Pump Room, which features in Northanger Abbey. Linley the Elder is described as rather stern and reserved. “Yet we hear frequently of his shedding tears; he laughed boisterously, though not perhaps often, and had fits of talkativeness.” He could be Mr. Bennet’s neighbor, although Linley didn’t inherit his social place but worked his way there, having begun his musical career as an organist’s apprentice pumping bellows.

Elizabeth Linley (like Jane Bennet) was a great beauty, “the link between an angel and a woman” and “the most beautiful flower that ever grew in nature’s garden,” as contemporaries put it. She was an uncommonly gifted actress and singer, and David Garrick offered to bring her to the London stage, but Thomas the Elder refused on the grounds that he would do better financially if he promoted his daughter himself. When she did perform in London, the King himself “ogled her as much as he dares to do in so holy a place as an oratorio.”

In 1772, she was reduced to a nervous collapse by the relentless badgering of one Captain Mathews and was gallantly whisked away by another admirer – actor, playwright, and friend of the family Richard Brinsley Sheridan. He had not yet spoken of his feelings for Elizabeth, and in what seems like an episode from Pride and Prejudice, the dashing rescue took on an even more romantic aspect. Elizabeth later wrote to Sheridan, “You are sensible that when I left Bath I had not an idea of you but as a friend. It was not your person that gained my affection. No, S—n, it was that delicacy, that tender compassion, that interest which you seemed to take in my welfare, that were the motives which induced me to love you.”

An item in the London Chronicle for March 24, 1772, reads: “Bath, March 23 – Wednesday, the eldest Miss Linley, of this city, justly celebrated for her musical abilities, set off with Mr. Sheridan, junior, on a matrimonial expedition to
Scotland.” They ended up not in Scotland but in Lille and were married on the way in a village not far from Calais. Thomas Linley, Sr., chased after them to France and brought them back to Bath. Immediately upon their return, Sheridan fought two duels with the tireless Mathews, and then a third duel at a later date. The elder Linley’s fury kept the couple apart until 1773, when they were married again in London.

The story of the Linley family is as tragic as it is fascinating. Five of the gifted Linley children died in their prime – Samuel and Mary at 18, Maria at 21, Thomas at 22, and Elizabeth at 37. Linley Sr.’s son-in-law Richard Tickell, crazed with a brain fever, threw himself from the top of his house. W. T. Parke writes in his Musical Memoirs that “this combination of misfortunes weighed so heavily on this ‘man of sorrow,’ that he was never afterwards seen to smile; or if he did sometimes make an effort, it was like the sun shooting a transient gleam through a dense cloud, which was lost again in an instant.”

Linley the Elder was not the only one left broken-hearted at young Thomas’s death. A long anonymous poem, “A Monody (After the Manner of Milton’s Lycidas) on the Death of Mr. Linley,” was published in London in 1778, and the Annual Register for 1784-85 printed Eliza’s moving poem “On my brother’s violin.” Making reference to Milton’s Lycidas, the poem begins,

Sweet instrument of him for whom
I mourn,
Tuneful companion of my Lycid’s hours,
How liest thou now neglected and forlorn,
What skilful hand shall now call forth thy powers!

As she contemplates the instrument, she thinks for a moment she hears it sigh, mourning its master. The violin finally laments, “Unstrung, untuned, forgotten let me be,” and the poem closes with the following stanza:

One fate with thee, dear Master, let me share,
Like thee in silent darkness let me lie;
My frame without thee is not worth my care!
With thee alone it lived, with thee shall die!

While most of Linley’s surviving music is choral, these poems and other contemporary sources suggest that it was as a violinist that he was best known at the time of his death. The author of the anonymous “Monody,” taking some poetic license perhaps, claims Orpheus himself “[t]ouch’d not with greater skill the warbling lyre,” and in a letter to his wife, Leopold Mozart made a point of how beautifully Linley played.

The surviving 1768 sonata demonstrates a dazzling technical brilliance unusual for anyone, let alone a 12-year-old boy. Based on this work, the claim that he was an extraordinary violinist seems understated – a melody in thirds, not as a tour de force, but as an answer to the very opening phrase! (Example 1) A tough trick to follow – which Linley does with idiomatic figurations (Example 2) that permeate the rest of the movement. One has only to look at the modulations after the double bar (Example 3) to see material that would make Paganini proud. The highest notes in Mozart’s violin works from the same year are almost a full two octaves lower than the top of Linley’s run before the first movement’s mid-point. These signs of a formidable technique are certainly striking, and possibly overwhelming, but
contemporary witnesses draw our attention not to Linley’s dexterity, but to his lyricism and the beauty of his playing: “those liquid notes,/So soft, so sweet, so eloquently clear,” as Elizabeth wrote in her poetic lament. That’s enough to make me think twice about the sonata, even though its technical challenges already set it apart. So, what is there behind this sensational showmanship?

In the adagio, there is simple and evocative beauty. The whirlwinds of the first movement’s close are over, and the violin’s melody, never falling below the violin’s second highest string, skips in both a childish and a melancholy way. Somehow it is neither entirely calm nor all that energetic, but rather captures a kind of dreamy liveliness. But the outer movements, too, while virtuosic, also tell us more. The showiness of the opening movement is as exuberant and open as it is difficult, and the frequent passages high on the fingerboard suggest a delight in the technical facility needed to pull them off.

The last movement, a frenetic jig, is witty and playful: the rondo theme, all double-stopped, returns each time after fermatas that hold our suspense, almost daring us not to laugh (Example 4). How much fun would I have had at the age of 12, drawing those out to tease the adults! The driving excitement of the A minor episode (Example 5) brings a stormier drama to the movement, but the jig returns, and the movement closes with a gesture that suggests a game of musical chairs — not a single chord, but an unrelenting four. It’s hard not to think of Linley continuing in his role as Puck from the year before.

Linley’s death clearly deprived us of something remarkable, and it is surprising that given his renown, more effort was not made to preserve his work. I once heard a rumor that his father was so devastated by Thomas’s death that he couldn’t bring himself to look at or hear his son’s music and that no one knows where he locked it away. Perhaps this testifies to something intensely personal about Linley’s violin music, something as personal as his playing; but maybe there was something special about that playing’s very vanishing, a captivating quality created by its ephemeral nature.

Referring to her brother’s able hand, Elizabeth writes,

Ah! none like his can reach those liquid notes,
So soft, so sweet, so eloquently clear,
To live beyond the touch, and gently float
In dying modulations on the ear.

Part of what makes the experience of music special is its impermanence; rather than regret the scarcity of Linley’s violin music, maybe we should be grateful that when we play this sonata, if we’re lucky, we might catch a whisper of something Puckish in the air.

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A gentleman, having complimented Mr. Linley the Elder on his daughters’ musical talents, asked Thomas, “Are you musical, too, my little man?” To which the boy replied, “Oh yes, we’re all geniuses.”
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