

Hysteria and Enlightenment

Mesmer, Mozart and Marie-Therese von Paradis

Roy Lisker

CHAPTER I

WIEN, WIEN , DU ALLEIN

Striking out- at last ! - on his own, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart spurned the quaint Episcopal principality of Salzburg in March of 1781 and moved to Vienna.

He was 25, still quite young, his determination to create a career for himself at the level of his own estimation of his abilities (*which in his fortunate case was shared by anybody who knew anything about music*) undiminished. Hanging around in the provinces bored him to tears. It was largely his father Leopold's fault. If he really wanted his son to settle in Salzburg, marry a local girl and slip into the of staid and stodgy burger like himself, why then did he take the child Mozart on a succession of dazzling voyages, spoiling him with the delights and of world-class cities like Rome, Naples, Munich, Vienna, Mannheim, Paris, London....?

Mozart's decision to take up residence in the capital of

European music was over-determined; growing up on the border of the Austrian empire made it inevitable. In his special case it might possibly have figured as a crime against humanity to have done otherwise! However, although the entire city was mad about music, he was mistaken in assuming that the bourgeoisie of dream-laden Vienna would be eager to bestow its precious attentions on musical geniuses.

Mozart came just a bit too early in European musical history to take his talent directly to the affluent middle class. For most of his career he was largely dependent on aristocratic patronage and church commissions. Such arrangements had worked throughout the Renaissance, Baroque and Rococco periods. By the middle of the 18th century they'd grown threadbare. Haydn and Gluck were among the last of the Viennese school to fatten themselves on the Hapsburg geese.

By the time Beethoven comes around, he is able to survive quite well, (though hardly at the level of his accomplishments) through a mixture of concert fees, publishers royalties, private commissions and (non-negligible) royal patronage. Even he could not have carried it off were it not for a brother who devoted his entire career to promoting his works. Public support made Brahms

a millionaire. As for Wagner, it is always inadvisable to generalize from a single case history, no matter how outrageous.

Mozart, alas, was born to create music, he hadn't come into the world to make money. Economically he fared badly in all the avenues then open to his profession. The falling out (literally) with the Catholic church began from the moment in May, 1781, when he was kicked down the stairs of the Viennese residence of his Salzburg employer, Archbishop Colloredo, by Count Karl Joseph Maria Felix Arco. Arco had been engaged by Mozart's father, and Colloredo himself, to persuade the unruly young genius to settle down to a regular job. Arco's conduct, and he appears to have reacted spontaneously on his own initiative, was not surprising, coming as it did from a mediocre civil servant confronted with a thriftless beatnik who refuses to learn the virtues of obedience and daily work routine.

Yet, officially Mozart was a Papal Chevalier. To be precise he'd received the "Order of the Golden Spur", whatever that is, when he visited Rome as a child prodigy. Gluck, another recipient of this honor, wore its medallion at official receptions. Mozart never wore his.

Mozart's situation with respect to his sacerdotal employers

did not improve very much when he joined the Freemasons in 1784. The record shows that he was a conscientious, even zealous member of his lodge. This did not affect his dealings with the monarchy. Compared to most other Catholic countries, Austria's attitude towards the Freemasons was much more accomodating. A papal ban had outlawed the society in 1738, but even Maria Theresa, a bigot if there ever was one, didn't enforce it. Joseph II tolerated them until 1785 when, in a single stroke, he bankrupted the fraternity by issuing a famous edict reducing the number of lodges to 3. The remaining ones were inaccessible to most of its membership.

It is doubtful, however, that Mozart's Freemasonry had very much to do with the relatively modest amount of religious music in his portfolio. Though obliged, in public, to uphold the "Roman holiness" of his imperial title , privately Joseph II was quite anti-clerical. He hated his mother's ostentatious piety and love of grandiose sacred spectacles. In 1782 pope Pius VI made a state visit to Vienna. 200,000 devout souls swarmed into the city to bathe in his darshan. Yet Joseph II handed out no commisions for religious music to local (*translation: the world's greatest living*) composers.

Stopping off in Mannheim on the way to Paris on December 10th, 1778, Mozart writes to his father asking him to send a letter to the French queen and daughter of Maria Theresa, Marie-Antoinette, via the intermediary of Dr. Franz Anton Mesmer, close family friend and patron of the Mozarts.

Mesmer had been in Paris since February. Leopold Mozart did not write, and Mesmer did not pass along such a letter, (as far as we know), although Mesmer had direct access to the aristocracy.

In 1780 Anton Mesmer did however write a letter to Mozart's father, in which he offers the young Mozart living space in his grand Viennese estate on the Landstrasse, rent-free, for as long as he wishes. He will not be there himself but Madame Mesmer and the rest of his family will be happy to accommodate him.

Mesmer himself was to stay away from Vienna for 14 years, by which time both his wife and Mozart himself were dead. Returning there briefly in 1792 he was rounded up by the security police under suspicion of Jacobinism, and expelled from Austria.

On the night of March 17th, 1781, after a turbulent journey from Salzburg, Mozart went directly to the Mesmer estate. It appears that he only stayed there overnight. Colloredo wanted him in his personal suite of apartments, where he could keep a tight

rein on him and garnish his wages.

In 1768 the 34 year old medical doctor Franz Anton Mesmer married the wealthy widow Frau van Posch. The Posch - Mesmer estate had been one of the important centers of Viennese cultural and scientific life until 1778, when a storm of professional spite and public ignorance broke over his head and Mesmer was forced to emigrate. He'd totally re-converted the house, filling it with salons for gatherings and discussions and laboratories for scientific research. A first rate scientist by the standards of the time , he'd earned 5 degrees: theology, philosophy, physics , chemistry, and medicine.

These had been acquired over an unusually long educational investment of 17-years, beginning in a monastic school at the age of 9. Graduating from Ingoldstadt University in Dillingen in 1759, he enrolled, at the relatively late age of 25, at the Medical Faculty of the University of Vienna . This was the period in which the University of Vienna, its Medical School in particular, was ridding itself of its reputation as a back-water institution and winning recognition throughout Europe. This transformation had been largely the work of Gerard van Swieten, Maria Theresa's doctor and a graduate from the clinic in Leyden of the renowned

doctor, Herman Boerhaave.

Mesmer graduated from the Medical School in 1761. The topic of his doctoral dissertation was the influence of the heavenly bodies on the human psyche and physiology. The ideas in this work are Paracelsian rather than astrological, and quite in keeping with the somewhat fantastic quality of theoretical science at that time. Its basic argument is that the tidal and gravitational forces of the sun, the moon and presumably the other planets, are linked to observable cycles in human biology and derangements in behavior. It is going too far to say that Mesmer anticipated the circadian cycle, but scientifically it is no better nor worse than string theory or the once universally accepted ether theory to explain the propagation of light.

Mozart's decision to return to Vienna in 1781 came on the rebound from a number of serious personal and professional disasters. Predominant among them was the sadly miscalculated second grand tour of Europe in 1778, designed to capitalize on his earlier exploits as a prodigy. The nostalgia for a glorious past is rarely a good augury for the future; though one may sometimes defy augury (*not a wit more!*) For the 20-year old Mozart, this

journey, filled with innumerable disappointments, came to a bitter halt in Paris with the death of his mother.

There were other developments that must have figured in his decision to relocate. In 1780 Maria Theresa was succeeded by her son, Joseph. Joseph II was one of the most progressive rulers in all of the 18th century, not excepting our own Founding Fathers. In his brief 10-year reign he dragged the Empire back from the medieval cesspool dear to his mother's heart. He abolished cruel and unusual punishments, capital punishment and torture. He curbed the power of the church and the aristocracy, built schools, hospitals and roads, introduced ideas of public health, and reformed the civil service and the judiciary.

Sadly, his personality was such that no-one liked him very much. He was that sort of intelligent but puritanical reformer who knows for a fact that his own tastes and ideas are enlightened, and intends to ram them down the throat of all and sundry until "ignorance and superstition" force him to back down.

With regards to music his attitudes, as with everything else, assumed a pragmatic cast. Ill-disposed towards sentimentality and with little use for religion, he was fond of music, played the violin well, and would probably have given Mozart a better situation,

had he not himself died in 1790, a year before Mozart.

Like certain well-meaning if self-righteous rulers of today, Joe was also despotically enlightened; very P.C. and utterly humorless. To give just one example, Joseph II hated funeral services and cemeteries. (As we will learn, the tragedy in the crypt of his wife Josepha may have been fresh in his mind). He therefore set about eliminating them. In a series of decrees he announced that all the corpses in the existing vaults were to be put into linen sacks and *re-buried* in communal graves. The sacks might be put into coffins for the funeral service, but once taken to the cemetery, they were dumped into the grave by a comical trapdoor and pulley method (well depicted in *Amadeus*) and the coffin returned to the church. Churches kept warehouses of re-usable coffins on their grounds. The tradition of linen-sack burials lasted into the early part of the 19th century.

Mozart, one is led to understand, not only lived at the wrong time, he also died at the wrong time. His “third class funeral” was very much to the taste of Joseph II.ⁱ

In due time the indignant, backward, superstitious populace of Vienna revolted against these measures. Even the Emperor had

ⁱ There are however some unresolved mysteries surrounding the disgraceful disposal of Mozart’s body. See Carr [5]

to give in. He saved face by issuing a proclamation to the effect that since it was obvious that he was, in morality and general civilization, so far above the heads of the ignorant unwashed peasants it had pleased God to give him to rule, he didn't give a damn what they did with the flesh of their dead relations. The populace of Vienna feted their freedom from Enlightenment when, in 1827, they formed the largest procession in the city's history to follow Beethoven's coffin to its final warehousing. It is amusing to read the text of Joseph's recantation:

“ Every day I see - unfortunately - how living people think in such material terms. They go to great lengths to insure their bodies will decay slowly after death, and thus remain stinking carrion for as long as possible. So I no longer care how they want to be buried. And you must explain to them that after I have demonstrated how practical and reasonable this method of burial is, I have no desire to force reason upon anyone who is not convinced. As far as coffins are concerned, each person may freely do in advance what he considers appropriate for his dead body.” [Brauenbehrens, pg. 416]

The romantic style in Mozart biography, from Marcia Davenport to Milos Forman (the word “romantic” hits a new low in *Amadeus*

ii) maintains that Mozart eventually succumbed, if not physically then psychically, to the “venom” discharged by the mephitic swamps of courtly conspiracy. The revisionist camp to which I belong, holds that his constitution, weakened by scarlet fever as an infant, obsessive overwork starting at age 3, and small pox at age 11, gave in to nephritis at the age of 35 . Dying young was not considered a mortal sin in those days. The doctor that was treating him died before he did (also of kidney disease) at the age of 26.

Vienna beckoned; Vienna promised freedom, musical excitement, friendships at his own level, girl friends and wives, career opportunities unimaginable in a cowpatch like Salzburg. Yet it was not without misgivings that he travelled there. In his brief span of two and a half decades, Mozart had already experienced the cruel fickleness of this great metropolis, that could exhibit such lavish generosity at one moment , then, without warning, turn a cold shoulder on its most honored and productive citizens.

He and his father discovered this when Leopold’s ragtime band returned to Vienna in 1768 and 1773 to profit from the adulation young Wolfgang had received there as a child prodigy in

ii “Anyone who has seen this film must admit, however reluctantly, that not a single word, scene, or location , to say nothing of the behavior and appearance displayed by the film’s characters, has anything at all to do with historical reality.” [[1] ,Braunbehrens pg. 409]

1762 .The court of Maria Theresa was , like that of any queen Bee, a jungle of intrigue: pettiness, plotting, treachery, malice, inventions and rumors, envy, spite, mischief, gossip, lies, conspiracy, and all the other deadly vices of dullards, mediocrities and bores.

Aristocrats generally are distinguished by their bad manners. There is no evidence that Mozart was singled out for exceptional abuse by his erstwhile colleagues, the clique of music-makers attached to the royal household. To *their* minds he was a spoilsport because he didn't know how to play the game. To *his* mind they had no right to their jobs because, as he understood it, they didn't know how to compose music. They kept the queen's (and later her son's) ears buzzing with all sorts of scabrous nonsense about him. One shouldn't forget however that they were saying similar things about each other. Their imaginations not being very large, there wasn't that much they could come up with.

One should also be aware of the fact that the ugliest of all the fabrications in this dirty stew, the accusation that Salieri had poisoned Mozart, had been encouraged, (though not invented) , by Constanza Mozart herself. (It had originated with Salieri , who cried out "I poisoned Mozart" as he was being dragged off to the

madhouse.)

In 1768 there was also another reason why the Viennese court, the powerful prince Kaunitz in particular, didn't exactly give the Mozarts the warm reception they'd anticipated. In the autumn of 1768 the queen's daughter, Josepha, was betrothed to another victim of Hapsburg incest, one Ferdinand. Leopold Mozart rushed his son and daughter up to Vienna to flush out lucrative commissions for the royal wedding.

A month or so before the wedding date a different Josepha, the wife of the future Joseph II, contracted small-pox. Maria-Teresa visited by her bedside and affectionately kissed her: the biographies of these feudal despots are filled with such laudatory revelations of their intrinsic saintliness. But now she too caught the infection. She learned that Josepha had passed away while she herself lay near death.

The queen recovered. Bells were set ringing throughout the city, and preparations for the royal wedding continued uninterrupted. Less than a week before the anticipated wedding Maria-Theresa and the living Josepha went to pray in the crypt of Josepha deceased. The coffin lid had not been properly sealed and the vault was contaminated. The expectant bride became infected

and died within a few days.

The epidemic was now raging all over Vienna, and the Mozarts fled, to Oelmutz. Too late. The 11-year old Mozart contracted the disease and nearly disappears from musical history. When they returned to Vienna the following month the *wunderkind*'s pale face was carpeted with red pimples like a meadow covered with carnations.

To her credit, Maria-Theresa did give them an audience. The wedding was off, so what commissions could she give them? The reception given them by Maria-Theresa's son, the bereaved Joseph II, was chilling. The prince Kaunitz simply refused to see them altogether.

An imperial medallion from the queen. No commissions, though there was talk of one, but it came to nothing. Arrigo, a functionary at the court, tried to raise the money to produce Mozart's first attempt at opera, *La Finta Semplice*. The project faltered. (Arrigo's later fall from grace was tragic. In the coming years he would be tried for embezzlement, condemned and sentenced to a term of imprisonment as a galley slave. Somehow he survived, but his life was ruined.)

One way or another the Mozarts, father and son found

themselves stranded in Vienna without even the coach fare back to Salzburg. Perhaps Leopold was too old, and Wolfgang too young, to hitchhike!ⁱⁱⁱ

It was during the disastrous expedition to Vienna of 1768, that the destinies of the Mesmer and the Mozart families came together for the first time. When Mesmer became informed of their plight, he invited them to stay at his house. He even commissioned an opera from the young Mozart, thereby becoming Mozart's first prominent patron. *Bastien et Bastienne* is a satire based on the text of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's musical comedy, *Le Devin du Village*. Leopold Mozart writes home:

....." *There is an incomparable garden with fine prospects and statues... a theatre, birdhouse, dovecote, and at the top a Belvedere that extends over towards the Prater.*"

The Mozarts stayed with the Mesmers a second time when they returned to Vienna in 1773. Then it was Franz Mesmer's turn to give *them* a concert. He'd become a competent musician on an instrument invented by Benjamin Franklin, his Glass Harmonica. The instrument made quite a stir in Europe when it was first played in recitals by the Englishwoman Miss Davies. Mozart's

ⁱⁱⁱ A joke. The author hitch-hiked from Vienna to Paris in 1968

celebrated piece for glass harmonica and string quartet was written as a gift for the blind musician Fraulein Kirchgessner.

Leopold in another letter:

.....“ *Dr. Mesmer played for us on Miss Davies’ “harmonica” or glass instrument, and played very well. The instrument cost him nearly 50 ducats, for it is very finely made.*” .

He goes on to say that Mesmer is the only person in Vienna that knows how to play it. 5 years later there may well have be *no* glass harmonica players in Vienna: Mesmer would be living in exile in Paris, using its’ peculiar rasping timbre to set the eerie mood of the seances around the magnetic *baquet* in the Place Vendome.

Returning to the setting that opens this narrative: Vienna, morning of the 18th of March ,1781. We extend an open invitation to ou readers to stroll with us out onto the terrace of the formerly fashionable, scenically located and still beautiful garden of the Mesmers’ Landstrasse estate. Soon we discover the astonishing young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart , who is delighted to be visiting here once again. He stands up to greet us, shake our hands. No, he does not know where Madame Mesmer has gone . She was not in

the house when he arrived yesterday night. To his amazement he was greeted at the door by someone he'd first met here in 1773, now the Mesmers' daughter-in-law, so thoroughly transformed in her disposition and general state of health as to be unrecognizable: Fräulein Franziska von Oesterling, known familiarly as "Franzl".

In the long run, Franzl's would become famous in her own right. Her fame would not be due to any combination of talent, intelligence or skill, nor indeed for anything she had done, but rather from her having been the subject of an experiment. A century and a half later her name would be enshrined as (depending on one's point of view) the first patient, or first victim, of Viennese psychotherapy. Unlike the hapless souls in the well known case histories of Dr. Sigmund Freud, Dora, the Wolf Man, the Rat Man, and so on, she really had been *cured* of her 15 hysterical symptoms by the application of Anton Mesmer's precursor of Einstein's Unified Field, the 27 principles of Animal Magnetism.

Since the days of his pioneering and courageous work, the superabundance of curious mental states provoked by hypnotism have been investigated by the Puysegur brothers, Braid, Elliotson, Bernheim, Liebhaut, Charcot, and in our own day, Ernest Hilgard

and Erica Fromm among others. To this day no-one has come up with explanations for these phenomena that are scientifically more convincing than Mesmer's claim that there exists a:

“ universally distributed and continuous fluid, which is quite without vacuum and of an incomparably rarefied nature, and which by its nature is capable of receiving, propagating and communicating all the impressions of movement.....”

Thus, on that afternoon in late winter of 1781, through a benevolent serendipity, it came about that the pair of persons strolling about the Mesmer's Landstrasse garden would be each a representative of the two fields most readily associated with Vienna: Music and Psychiatry. One might consider them the dual faces of a single vocation, the relief of psychic pain. One cannot doubt that the Viennese soul has ever been deeply wounded: in support of which claim I recommend any of the works of the playwright/novelist Bernhard Thomas.

Mozart writes home:

“I write this - where? - in Mesmer's garden on the Landstrasse - the gracious old lady (Mrs. Mesmer was then 52) is not at home - but the former Fraulein Franzl, nowadays Mrs. von Posch (she was married to Mesmer's stepson) is - she has bidden and is actually

still bidding me to send you and my sister a thousand respects - listen, on my honor I hardly recognized her she is so large and so fat - she has three children - two girls and a boy - the eldest girl is called Nannerl, four years old and one would swear she was six - the boy's three and one would swear he was seven - and one would certainly take her three-quarter-year-old baby for two - they're all growing up so healthy and strong.^{iv}

That she was in fine fettle much have been little short of amazing to him; for she had hardly been that way when he saw her last in 1773. Age twenty-nine at the time, she'd been afflicted with acute hysteria for many years. This was the name given to a condition that found expression through violent symptoms erupting in sporadic fits. These fits would be preceded by a build up of emotional tension. Without warning the blood would rush to her head, she would experience great suffering and start screaming. Pains shot through ears, teeth and other parts of her head. The delirium that ensued included violent thrashing about and other manifestations of rage. These paroxysms climaxed with vomiting, then physical collapse and coma.

^{iv} (An Ode to Franzl's recovery, scored for glass harmonica, mandolin and arpeggione, is in the lost catalogue of Mozart's permanently lost works. Editor's note)

Freud and his ilk have made our world cynical: today one's tendency is to assume that people do things like that to get attention. A decade before Mesmer was born certain people might also have said , and acted on their belief that she had been possessed by, or was the victim of witchcraft. The last recorded European witch-burning took place in Scotland in 1722. The belief in demonic possession persisted for some time after that, and many people, even in Westernized societies, still believe in such things today . One of Mesmer's most determined enemies at the Austrian court, Dr. van de Haen, was a confirmed believer in the existence of witches and devils.

Mesmer's response was characteristic of his immense curiosity and keen powers of observation, identifying him thoroughly with the spirit of the Enlightenment. Here is what he tells us:

“ For me it was a highly favorable occasion for observing accurately that type of ebb and flow to which ANIMAL MAGNETISM subjects the human body. ”

What he had observed was the existence of periodic cycles in her recurrent symptoms. They reminded him of the rise and fall of the tides. The magnetic fluid, so he argued, must undergo a similar

motion due to the presence of powerful sources of attraction. If he could control this tidal flow, he could perhaps bring about the salutary 'crisis', that would dissolve the 'blockage' of this fluid from her psyche.

These ideas are not so far from those of modern psycho-therapy, whether it be the 'catharsis' or 'cathexis' of Freud, the 'orgasm', of Reich, the 'primal scream' of Janov. They are also simpler, less encumbered with pseudo-scientific sub-texts and, being easier to falsify, are probably closer to the truth.

The great events of the scientific revolution of the previous centuries, the rising crescendo from Copernicus to Kepler to Galileo to Newton, had formed a mental disposition in educated society, a tendency to think of the entire universe as a kind of laboratory for doing experiments and making observations : stars, rocks, plants, weather, animals, numbers, shapes and bodies - even human beings.

In the long run it was inevitable that people should start regarding one another with that same curious, fascinated and yes, somewhat callous eye that was being focused upon the rest of nature. What could be more natural than to treat the stranger manifestations of human behavior in exactly the same way that an

astronomer looks at an unfamiliar planet or a zoologist classifies a new species? Why not try to cure a psychological condition in the same way that a surgeon extracts a tooth or sets a broken bone in plaster? Franz Anton Mesmer was the first scientist of distinction in our tradition to do this, and he immediately discovered hypnotism which had been present in human nature for a million years without once receiving a systematic scientific description.

The special horror that we feel at the experiments done on human beings by Nazi doctors - and it is obviously natural and right that we regard these as horrible - is due in part to the recognition that their evil activity was a pathological extension of a mentality that has possessed the entire world since the advent of the scientific age. We are so conscious of the benefits accruing to mankind from experimenting with everything, from encouraging an undeviating, systematic, cold, indifferent, curiosity towards all things that enter our field of vision, that we must be constantly reminding ourselves that this modality of relationship towards Nature can and has also been productive of the greatest evils.

“ For me it was a highly favorable occasion for observing accurately that type of ebb and flow to which ANIMAL MAGNETISM subjects the human body. ”

At that stage, in 1773, Mesmer still believed that the hypnotic “force field” , what he called magnetism, was so universal as to embrace all gravitational, electrical, magnetic, chemical and psychic phenomena.

Through the experience of bringing about the cure of Fräulein Oesterline, Mesmer abandoned the use of magnets and claimed that the field associated with *animal* magnetism, was an autonomous natural entity, not connected in any way with metallic or terrestrial magnetism.

Anton Mesmer began his treatments of Fraulein Osterline on July 28th, 1774. (The Bibliography is at the end of the next chapter.)
