

# *Hysteria and Enlightenment*

## *Chapter 4*

*“Music is the shaping of the invisible”.... Leonardo da Vinci*

**Colas:**

*“ Diggi, daggi, schurry, murry; horum, harum, lirim, larum  
Raudi, Maudi, giri, gari; posito, besti, basti, Saron froh;  
fato, mato, quid pro quo! ”*

**Bastien :** (*furchtsam*) : *Ist die Hexerei zu Ende?*

*..... spell cast by the magician, Colas, to solve the emotional crisis of Bastien and Bastienne; from the opera of W. A. Mozart, 1768*

## **Marie- Thérèse von Paradis**

### *I. Prelude*

The child prodigy - combining the unspotted innocence of infancy, the presence of innate mental formations, and a touch of noble savagery - maintained a cherished place in the Enlightenment cosmology. Much of the excitement generated by the young Mozart's international concert tours derived from the feeling that his very existence gave proof to the celestial connections of spirit and brain announced by the proponents of the Scientific Revolution. The child prodigy was convincing evidence for the unlimited potential of Man's latent abilities. Combining a trendy endorsement of Materialism with a dogmatic belief in the power of Reason *over* brute Matter, in the inherent benevolence of Nature, and the exquisite craftsmanship of the Man-Machine (*phrase coined by hack philosopher Julien Offray de La Mettrie at the court of Frederick the Big*), the Enlightenment world-view cultivated a generous faith in the constitution of the child mind; in its

extraordinary accomplishments its philosophers saw the definitive evidence for the positive upward slope of all the differential equations which God had promulgated at the beginning of His Creation.

No class of society suffers so much from the trite oversimplifications of an age as its children. It is they who must endure its prejudices, religious dogmas, theories of education and psychology, its criminal codes, its prisons and, not the least, the tyrannical abuse of their parents. It is the children, who must carry the blame for their elders failure in life, their personal unhappiness, their frustrated loves, their dysfunctional personal relations and, if these be unnatural monsters, their physical, psychic and sexual attacks.

In this respect the prodigies of the 18th century were particularly vulnerable. Mozart was lucky to be blessed with a good music teacher and a decent human being for a father. Beethoven and Paganini were forced to their miraculous heights by the kicks and blows of drunken fiddlers. They reached them, but at a price they should not have had to pay; that Art transmutes our sufferings is hardly an argument for turning artists into suffering victims. Yet a great many prodigies were, and still are, drawn from the ranks of abused children.

The case of the piano prodigy Josef Hofmann was something of a *cause celebre* in its day.<sup>i</sup> At the age of 12 Hofmann could already play rings around most professionally active pianists. In 1897, his father Casimir brought him over to the States from Poland, with the intention of taking the country by storm. A dazzling triumph at the Metropolitan

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<sup>i</sup> Hofmann pursued the career of a world-class pianist until his death in 1959. He led an unhappy and tragic life, marred by promiscuity, alcoholism and nervous collapse. I am not qualified to trace the roots of these personal difficulties to his upbringing as a child prodigy, but the connection is unavoidable.

Opera House was followed by a concert tour overloaded to the point of brutality, leading the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to take out a lawsuit against Casimir. Eventually an anonymous philanthropist gave him \$50,000 under the condition that his son retire from the concert stage until he reached 18.

The records hold many such stories of parental greed and insensitivity, though rarely to this extreme; all the same, the accounts of the nervous breakdowns of John Stuart Mill, Norbert Wiener and Yehudah Menuhin make for disturbing reading. Also, all the examples I've given are of creative individuals who went on to have distinguished careers and wrote books about themselves. One must raise their number by some orders of magnitude to include those who burned out, went into unrelated occupations, or didn't want to share their life story with a wider public. Most notable in this class is the Hungarian pianist, Ervin Nyierigazi. At the turn of the century he was one of the most astonishing musical prodigies on record. He was "rediscovered" in the 1970s, hiding out in a flophouse in San Francisco's tenderloin. <sup>ii</sup>

The fascinating life-story of Marie-Therese von Paradis is best appreciated when told in full; in it one finds a bit of everything. Her gifts and handicaps were so symbiotically connected that they may well have been dual aspects of the same psychic universe. The mixture of parental solicitation and mistreatment, of spoiling and physical abuse that held her prisoner produced a psychosomatic state uniquely adapted to these circumstances and to the age she lived in. Because of this one cannot, despite one's moral outrage, avoid a feeling of inevitability in her personal tragedy. In some sense she embodies the darker side, the

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<sup>ii</sup> Lost Genius; Kevin Bazzana; DaCapo Press, 2008

sinister undertow, the unspoken realities that were an integral part of the most extraordinary blossoming of musical art in a single city in all recorded history.

Because of her connections with the intellectual luminaries of late 18th century Vienna, scientists such as Mesmer and van Swieten, composers such as Mozart, Gluck, Haydn and Salieri, poets such as Burger and Pfeffle; through her activities as a music teacher educator in the age of Schubert and Weber; and through her own concertizing, in Vienna and much of Western Europe, her biography supplies the most poignant hologram, the veritable touchstone, of that brilliant, passionate and troubled time in the intellectual history of Central Europe.

The theme of artistic excellence at the cost of sensory privation will also appear in her story, though in a somewhat incredible guise. Excellence in any field forces one to concentrate on its unique demands. In an art as difficult as music this has been known to lead to one-sided, socially inept, spiritually deformed personalities. Since the principal fine arts restrict themselves to one sensory domain at a time, handicaps, natural or induced, in the other senses may even confer certain advantages. Many societies, including our own, have approved the deliberate mutilation of artists to enhance their concentration or performance in the one area in which they are expected to excel.

It was the custom in the Ottoman Empire to blind singers in order for them to better concentrate on their own voices. Kindred to this is the castration of singers in our own civilization (into the mid- 19th century!). The Italian tradition of locking music students into a room from which they can't expect to be released until they have learned their

piece or completed their compositions, is a more morally acceptable application of the same idea. Imprisonment in one form can sometimes aid and abet the products of creative thought. The French novelist, Colette, was locked up in their apartment by her husband and forced to produce novels, which he then sold under his own name; eventually she escaped. Other examples are Proust's confinement to his bed, or Stephen Hawking's inhuman ordeal.

Prison in the literal sense, and its no less onerous cousin, exile (involuntary or otherwise), have often been the mothers of great literature: Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Charles d'Orleans, Hugo, Marx, Joyce, Beckett, Ibsen ..

All of these examples, whether barbarous, unjust, or simply arbitrary, point to the same idea: that critical elements in what is considered a normal existence must be sacrificed if one wishes to attain great heights in some intellectual discipline. The conditions of life must often be bitter if the fruit is to be sweet.

And, so very often, the final result is not worth the tradeoff. The familiar image of the concert artist bitterly and vindictively ruing the childhood that was stolen from him, just so that he could live a life of celebrity he did not want is, unfortunately, far more than just a sentimental metaphor.

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Born in Vienna on the 15th of May, 1759, pianist, singer, composer, educator, Marie-Therese von Paradis, prodigy and blind invalid, is the most famous of Franz Anton Mesmer's patients; controversies about their relationship continue down to the present day.

Her father, Herr Joseph von Paradis was of the minor nobility, a career bureaucrat in the administration attached to the court of the empress Maria-Theresa. Beginning his career as the “imperial and royal court secretary “ to the Court Chamber of Commerce, later to the Austrian Court Chancellery, he finally reached and remained at the post of “Councillor of the Lower Austrian Government Board”. He was about the same age as Anton Mesmer; they moved in the same circles and were acquainted with one another.

The next two quotations are from the account of Marie-Therese’s medical history written by Herr Paradis himself and published in the Wiener Zeitung in the 1770’s:

*....“ On December 9th, 1762, it was found that when she awoke she was unable to see. Her parents were all the more surprised and grieved by this sudden infirmity because, since her birth, there had been no indication of any change in that organ.”*

That she was not born blind, yet became so at age 3, will turn out to be of some importance: it implies that she retained the vestiges of a visual memory. Many physical signs indicated to her doctors that the origins of her blindness were psychic rather than physical. The optic nerve was diagnosed as sound by all the doctors who examined her : Barth, professor at the Medical Faculty, specialist in the anatomy and diseases of the eye; Anton van Störck, personal physician to Maria-Theresa; and the Baron de Wenzel. Mesmer would reach the same conclusion when he accepted her case in 1777. Among other things, they noted symptoms such as compulsive twitchings of the eye muscles which caused them to bulge out of their sockets at moments of

emotional stress.

*"It was ascertained that it was a case of perfect amaurosis, whose cause may have been a reverberating fluid or some fright the child had had that night - some noise at the door of her room."*

Her behavior exhibited the basic traits of the hysterical personality syndrome familiar to the medical profession at that time : depressions, sudden rages, seizures, vomiting, delirium, and symptoms characterized simply as "mad behavior". The family was dysfunctional and quarrelsome, the mother being herself subject to hysterical episodes, her father of a violent, impulsive disposition.

Even before going blind it had been recognized that Marie-Therese von Paradis was gifted for any occupation involving manual dexterity, things such as knitting, lace-making, piano playing, and card tricks. Blindness may have improved this skills by concentrating her attention on her muscular reactions. Her hearing was also amazingly acute. <sup>iii</sup> Her natural endowments included absolute pitch, an enormous musical memory (in her prime she commanded a repertoire of 60 piano concertos), and the musical imagination of a professional composer, an occupation which few women had the means or opportunity to pursue until relatively recently.

Although it must be admitted that there still exists a great deal that we do not know about innate musical talent as opposed to acquired ability , it is fair to say that her abilities could not have been realized by training alone . She was, in fact, a true musical prodigy , born into a family that seemed to have lived quite happily on the razor's edge of

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<sup>iii</sup> It has been suggested that blind persons excel in the acuteness of their hearing only because sighted persons tend to neglect its development. See [7 ], pgs. 250 -252.

psychosis. The home situation forced a rather cruel adaptation upon her that evidently worked, if by “working” one means that it kept the peace in a stormy household, and gave her the living space needed for developing her exceptional gifts. Certain it is that her blindness helped her to survive (and to survive quite well) in a situation where she could easily have ended up spending most of her adult life as an unskilled blind invalid, or even in an asylum.

The empress (*No American need ever capitalize the titles of monarchical despots*) was moved to take an interest in her namesake; as a matter of policy, Maria Theresa bestowed generous scholarships on young, gifted musicians afflicted with handicaps. To cover her education the family of the young prodigy received a yearly pension of 200 florins<sup>iv</sup> Because of this pension Marie-Thérèse von Paradis received the best musical education possible at the time.

*And, given the time and place, what possibilities!*

Her piano studies were with the Czech Kozeluch, the best pianist in the imperial capital before the arrival of Mozart; and with Dutch virtuoso Joseph Richter; singing with the celebrated Vincenzo Righini; composition with, (no less!) Salieri<sup>v</sup>. Another of her famous teachers was the Abbe Vogler; his students included Carl- Maria von Weber and Meyerbeer.

It was the age of inventions, major and minor: Watt, Fulton,

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<sup>iv</sup> After consulting sources on the purchasing power of the currency of the times, I estimate this to be equivalent to \$6,000 today: a single person could live quite well on 550 florins per year.

<sup>v</sup> Salieri's place in music history as a teacher of composition is very important; he also taught Beethoven, Schubert, Hummel and Liszt. Despite his feud with Mozart, which certainly influenced the methods and tastes of his students, { in 1816 he broke off his friendship with Schubert because of his frank use of the Mozartian style in his setting of Schiller's poem *Laura am Klavier* }, and his mediocrity as a composer, he may be said to have had as much influence on the composers of the 19th century as did J.S. Bach on the 18th through the education he gave his own sons.



Franklin, Jenner, Hamilton... Ingenious inventions were built to accommodate her particular difficulties: a pegboard for notating music was constructed by a close friend of the family, Johann von Riedinger. He may have been attached to her: Riedinger accompanied her on her concert tours and wrote the libretti of her two operas produced in Vienna in the years 1791 and 92. A precursor of the typewriter, a kind of miniaturized printing press for writing letters, was designed for her by Wolfgang von Kempelen. These instruments were passed on to her students at the institute for blind musicians which she opened in Vienna in 1808. Typewriters and word-processors have made them obsolete, but they must have served a major role in the education of the blind all through the 19th century.

It is clear that, apart from her handicap, her musical education would have been the envy of any aspiring artist of that time. Whatever responsibility for her psychosomatic illnesses one is sorely tempted to drop on the hunched shoulders of the irascible Joseph von Paradis, one cannot deny that he did everything within his power, both to educate her and to find the best medical treatment for her.

*But, my Lord - the best medical treatment????!!*

What subtleties of meaning are contained in that commonplace yet sinister phrase! Enter from stage right, circa 1767, the redoubtable Anton van Störck: Marie-Therese von Paradis is eight years old. Störck, bedside physician of *the* Maria-Theresa, who receives a footnote in the toxicology section of medical encyclopedias, is enough of a physician to recognize that her blindness is psychogenic.

*That's something at least!*

Had the voice of duty so commanded, a man of his caliber would not have hesitated to operate. Had he done so he would have discovered that the optic nerve was intact; but by then it would have been too late. Perhaps it would have spared Marie-Therese a lifetime of misery by getting it over once and for all. Who is to say? Even hindsight would not have been of much help in this particular situation. The medical knowledge and infrastructure needed to help someone in her situation is not available even today. Yet, having made a correct diagnosis, to imagine what Anton von Störck then put her through reduces the imagination to beggary, at least for us genteel folk.

For 5 years Störck persevered in the application of traditional Galenic remedies: blisters, bleedings, cauterizations and purgatives. He had a particular fondness for purgatives, making frequent and fulsome use of his beloved pulsatilla and valerian. Yet Anton van Störck was no superstitious empiric from the Dark Ages! He was a modern doctor, lifted from blind ignorance on the shoulders of Paracelsus, von Helmont, Sydenham, and Boerhaave, a healer fortunate indeed to be living in the Age of Reason Triumphant!

No, indeed: Anton van Störck was a true believer in the scientific method! In Experiment! In Progress and its inexorable advance! In the superiority of his orthodox medicine over that of the “unlicensed quacks” roaming the villages! How fortunate, indeed, was Marie-Therese von Paradis, to be alive in the great age of enlightened medicine, and to be in the hands of such a one as he!

Galen having proven ineffective for half a decade, it was high time to play with new ideas, new inventions. Everybody was inventing something-or-other these days; let him try his hand at it! In 1771, Anton

van Störck launched his campaign against ignorance and disease by encasing the head of Marie-Therese von Paradis, now aged 12, in a plaster cast.<sup>vi</sup>

Psychologists are encouraged to study the tendency one finds everywhere in human nature, to unconsciously desire the immobilization, whether by entombment or moth-balling, of others: loved ones, enemies, even complete strangers. Edgar Allen Poe was particularly adept at exploiting this universal human weakness for literary purposes. It was in the enlightened 18th century that Dr. Benjamin Rush, America's first psychiatrist, invented the restraining chair for immobilizing every muscle of the body, with a thick wooden felt lined box to be put over the head, with only a single hole on the lower rim for the purposes of breathing. A patient in his mental asylum in Philadelphia afflicted with frenzy could be kept a prisoner in one these things for weeks at a time.

In the period 1953 -1964, this toy was resurrected by Ewen Cameron, president of the American Psychiatric Association and director of the Society for Human Ecology in Montreal. There it was used to conduct CIA-funded "depatterning" experiments investigating the possibility of creating of human zombies. ( See [15], pgs. 131 - 143 )

Marie-Therese von Paradis was forced to endure the torments of a plaster cast around her head for two months. Throughout this period an uninterrupted flow of suppurating pus trickled down from the edges of the cast onto her neck and shoulders. As with the rashly administered neuroleptic drugs of modern-day alienists, this novel form of treatment

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<sup>vi</sup> The film "Mesmer" starring Alan Richman, does a great job with this.

produced side effects: seizures and hysterical paroxysms; rage, delirium; ranting and hallucinations. Like the ocean waves beneath a typhoon, her eyeballs were wracked with convulsive spasms, until the pupils drew themselves up under the upper eyelids and only the whites were visible.

Let us withdraw, momentarily, from this horror to collect our wits. One is not dealing here with unsanitary, illiterate and destitute peasants in the Austrian countryside, such as one might possibly find even in the neighborhood of, say, the grand estate of Esterhaza. There, even as Franz Josef Haydn sits in comfort, though hard at work, composing his immortal string quartets for the verifiably over-civilized Baron, the impoverished populace are being carried off by epidemics and famines like micro-organisms in an autoclave. In such pastoral settings one would normally expect to find atrocious therapies applied by brutish quacks, ignoramuses endowed with some sort of license acquired, perhaps, from a few years apprenticeship to someone as ignorant as themselves.

Not at all! Herr von Paradis belongs to the Habsburg nobility; his daughter is therefore also a member of the nobility. There is no want of money: Herr von Paradis is a respectable civil servant with privileges of seniority and tenure, his daughter the beneficiary of a scholarship awarded expressly for her education and medical care. Anton van Störck is also nobility, personal doctor to the Empress, no less. Mesmer, who will be taking her case in a few years is rich and (through marriage) also a member of the nobility. Baron de Wenzel is nobility.

It is within the drawing-rooms of this caste of privilege, at the very summit of the aristocracy of one of the great European powers, in

the Age of Enlightenment, that one reads of a 12-year old *blind* girl who is to have her head encased in plaster *for two months* , so that the pus and blood will dribble down her cheeks and chin and into her mouth , climbing up to her temples before surrendering to the pull of gravity, to run in many little streams over the ridges and gulleys of her ludicrous cranial sarcophagus, seeping into the passages of her ears and trickling through her hair, so that she will scream in agony, succumb to seizures and exhibit “mad behavior” !

The lesson to be gained from this are of universal application: that the victims of ignorance and stupidity aren't concentrated in a single social class, that wealth and birth are but trifling defenses against their hegemonic sway.

One can hazard the hypothesis that the psycho-physical delinquescence of the European aristocracy also had a role to play. Even in that advanced age the pampered nobility were notoriously incapable of looking after themselves. A similar hideous farce, with many embellishments, will be replayed a few years later , in the treatment of the madness of George III. The cycles of therapy, periodically renewed to which he was subjected by a whole family of quacks, the Willises, constituted little more than aggravated torture over three decades (1788 - 1820) (See [16] ) .

The authority of a medical quack with the right recommendations and credentials evidently carried more weight with these enfeebled lords than any amount of native common sense. It is difficult to imagine a capable craftsman, blacksmith, merchant or financier of this bustling era ever allowing a man like Anton van Störck anywhere near his daughter.

Somehow, by what means one knows not, even a Störck would come to realize that his radically original therapies weren't working. Yet: he didn't give up. A good doctor never does. Did Hippocrates ever give up? Did Christ give up when his disciples deserted him? Did Paracelsus give up, when children stoned him as he wandered from village to village? Did Isaac Newton give up, when he thought so long and hard about the rotation of the moon that he developed hallucinations and migraine headaches?

*Don't give up!*

*Persist until the patient is cured!*

*That rule outweighs all the others*

*in the lexicon of a truly Enlightened doctor!*

Anton von Störck rummaged through the full range of the medical arsenal before coming up with his next innovation: *electroshock therapy!* Electroshock therapy is not new. It was proposed by John Wesley, praised by Benjamin Franklin, and experimented with by many faculty members of the Medical school of the University of Vienna, including van Störck, van Haan, and Jan Ingenhousz. Despite the widespread use of ECT no more was known then about the effects of frequent and violent shocks on the human psyche than is known today. One harbors the suspicion that Stoerck was using Marie-Therese von Paradis as a guinea pig for potential communications in the prestigious medical journals of the day:

*Altogether, Anton van Storck administered 3,000 powerful shocks from a Leyden jar to the eyeballs of Marie-Therese von Paradis.*

This caused more agonizing pain, and a return of the former cycle of fits and delirium. To counter these side effects battalions of leeches were marshalled into combat, fixed bayonets at the ready, and Marie-Therese was bled to within an inch <sup>vii</sup> of the grave.

We dare not imagine what might have happened to her, had not another doctor, the Baron de Wenzel, intervened . By declaring her case incurable he allowed van Störk to save face, and spared her further suffering. Now, at the onset of adolescence, Marie-Therese von Paradis was free to celebrate her coming-out in society with a face that, for many years to come, would look as if it had come fresh from the butcher's block.

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<sup>vii</sup> centimeters not being yet invented

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