

Chapter Three.

(1834 - 1847)

'Melancholy Puzzi'

Meanwhile Hermann did in fact assimilate his tutor's technique at the piano. Liszt was anxious to demonstrate the prowess of his protege and arranged for him to give a concert. His age was even understated, twelve rather than fourteen, in order to enhance his reputation. A large audience attended, and all were impressed by the young pianist from Hamburg. On the threshold of great success, Hermann received a blow with the news that Liszt was about to elope with Marie, Countess d'Agoult. She was trapped in a loveless marriage with Count Charles d'Agoult, twenty years her senior. She was beautiful and clever, she was a wife and mother, but even the fashionable life of Paris failed to hold her and she dreamt of a life of escapism with Franz Liszt. (1) It was indeed a great blow to Hermann who felt it was the end of everything. He vowed to follow Liszt, even if he had to beg his bread! At first Liszt refused but after a lot of persistence he capitulated, and agreed that Hermann should join him in Switzerland three months from then. Madame Cohen had no option but to pack up and go with her son. Her other son went to boarding-school and she took her daughter Helene with her also. Eventually they left for Geneva. It was hardly an ideal situation for Hermann, but in his heart he had nothing but admiration for the young Countess who had left everything to follow her dream. The admiration was not reciprocated however, she was jealous of Hermann and not unnaturally thought of him as an embarrassing extra and in the end she managed to oust him. At the time however Hermann suspected nothing. The Mayor of Geneva asked Liszt to establish a School of Music there. Hermann was appointed a Professor of Music. Then with his customary kindness Liszt was able to obtain students for the young professor who was only fifteen!

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Liszt also persuaded the new academy to recognise Hermann as official Professor of Music. Thus Hermann earned quite a lot of money but he also squandered it. It was perhaps irresponsible of Liszt and Hermann's mother to allow the boy the use of so much money. Moreover he became influenced by the ideas of Voltaire and Rousseau who were both highly regarded in Geneva. The Church was in fact flourishing at this time with, for example, the rise of new religious orders. But Hermann was unaware of this new surge of life in the church however, and he would not have learned about that in the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau!

George Sand, in her 'Lettres d'un Voyageur', has left an amusing account of meeting up with Liszt, Marie d'Agoult and Hermann at Chamonix. (2) Later they converged on the Cathedral in Fribourg where a Mooser organ had recently been installed. Mooser himself was there to demonstrate the new instrument and Liszt took the keyboard of the great organ. Hermann was profoundly moved by what was a new experience for him, and years later he remarked:

"Liszt touched the great keys of this colossal harp of David, whose majestic sounds gave me a vague idea of your grandeur, o my God. I was filled with a foretaste of holiness. Did you not cause to stir in my soul an intimation of religious faith. What then was that deep feeling which I always experienced since my youth, when I myself touched or

heard someone else play the notes of an organ. It would affect me so much that I became unwell and was advised to avoid the instrument!. O Jesus my beloved, you were at the door of my heart and I would not open to you."

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Hermann was still only fifteen. He developed bad habits especially that of gambling. Liszt was related to Prince Belgiojoso and he and his wife hosted concerts in which the prince, who had a fine voice sang accompanied by Hermann. At one of these concerts Hermann noticed gaming tables and later his friends invited him to watch. Hermann wrote later:

"I think it was the first time I had ever seen this sort of game, and I eagerly followed the fortunes of the players. Large sums of money were lost and won. I asked if I might try something myself."

"It was there", Hermann continued, "that the vice which ruled the best years of my life originated. It didn't give me a moment's rest and often drove me to the verge of suicide, because of the enormous losses I sustained."

Later on he himself gave a self-description a gambler thus:

"He had become a slave to an implacable tyrant, which gave him no rest by day or night. If he did happen to snatch a few moments sleep he was disturbed by bad dreams, incessant hopes of gain or the horror of loss. He woke up with a start, memory recalling a picture of his desperate plight. During these long sleepless nights he planned to take his life, but wanted to try his luck just one more time before carrying out his plan."

Liszt who was running short of money started on concert tours and Hermann acted as his secretary and earned his keep. Meanwhile Marie d'Agoult had borne two children to Liszt. Her antagonism to Hermann increased as she felt he would usurp the place and resources due to her children. Meanwhile also Liszt began to fear that his long absence from Paris would cause his fame there to wane in favour of some up and coming musician, so he decided to return. Hermann was intent on following him although it meant giving up a good position. Liszt himself tried to persuade him to stay but to no avail. Hermann joined up with Liszt (and Marie d'Agoult) in Paris. Strangely however they began to drift apart while Hermann himself drifted more deeply into a life of gambling and attendant disorders. He abandoned his mother and set up in a flat of his own. But eventually he tired of this lifestyle and returned to her. He developed a friendship with Princess Belgiojoso who was herself very musical.

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Hermann noted:

"In the salon which the Princess opened in Paris, some of the most distinguished writers and musicians met - Rossini, Meyerbeer, Bellini and Liszt. Wednesday was 'concert day' and the remarkable singing voice of Emile Belgiojoso, the Princess's husband, contributed to their success."

Through her Hermann gained access to all the fashionable places in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Indeed her patronage of Hermann did much to rehabilitate him and she put him in charge of her household arrangements, concerts and so on. When Franz Liszt returned to Paris from Geneva he kept in touch with the Princess and Hermann was a kind of go-between. Later when a certain coolness developed between Liszt and Hermann, the Princess intervened:

"I gave your message to Hermann, who told me he had written to you without receiving an answer. He concluded that he was writing to you too often."

Later she helped Hermann organise a concert to assist his finances but this turned out to be a failure. Hermann was neglecting practice and discipline. As a result, feeling frustrated, he decided to go back to Hamburg to visit his father but the old man sent him packing!

However he went on a concert tour in Germany where he was still popular and the tour proved successful.

At this time he fell in love with a French pianist, older than himself, and they became engaged. This shocked the Countess d'Agoult who was hardly in a position to point a finger herself! Back in Paris, Hermann met an Italian singer called Mario whom he coached. They became friends and Hermann accompanied Mario on his concert tours which became very successful. They travelled to London for a concert which met with great success. They stayed some time there and Hermann gave piano lessons, though he continued to gamble. He ended the season in London with a highly acclaimed concert. With some resources in his pocket, Hermann left for Italy, hoping to meet Liszt. He was now eighteen years of age. At this period he began to compose some melodies. He met up with Liszt and they spent some time in Rome sightseeing, visiting all the churches and also the Colosseum the arena of the early Christian martyrs.

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One day they were at the Villa Adriana from which they could see St. Peter's Basilica. Saint-Beuve composed a poetic record of the occasion which he dedicated to Liszt.

"The rays of the setting sun fall gently on the arena.
soon it will flood it with the full force of its mighty power.
The horizon is now no more than a boundless ocean.
In the distance the sharp outline of St. Peters cuts across it.
Near us your Hermann, so obviously proud of you
Puzzi of former days happy and excited.
Eagerly questioning you about flowers and medals and relics."

Hermann indeed must have been intrigued by the wearing of medals in the streets of Rome and of course by the flowers surrounding altars and statues and images of Our Lady in the churches. The days passed quickly and Hermann used up his resources. He had enjoyed Italy but now he had to leave it - and Liszt. He again set out for London. Soon afterwards, Princess Belgiojoso who was also visiting England, wrote to Liszt and in this letter and the next one written in 1839 she complains about him:

"Thick-Thorn House.
August 6th. 1839.
As for Hermann, I think he is a good boy and I have nothing against him. He is really still a child, but he has done something which hinders me from helping him as I would like. It's like this: I quite honestly thought I was helping him, but it seems according to himself that it's the other way round and that I have offended him."
Hermann was now nineteen and became obstinate, almost embittered toward his mentor even though she had really been a mother to him and had tried to better him. Naturally the Princess was very hurt. In another letter she wrote:

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"I know that he will now say that he never meant what he said, and that he only complained in a fit of depression. But for me the fact that he entertained the thought for one moment has changed everything. I hope you will not reproach me for this, my conscience is clear - I never did him any harm."

Obviously the Princess was very sensitive herself and it was the end for Hermann as far as she was concerned. She had done a lot for him and now he would feel the consequences of his foolish remarks. Liszt who remained rather distant didn't answer her letter until October. "I don't know how I can put in a good word for Puzzi with you since I will need one myself!"

But the Princess did reply to Liszt:

"Kenilworth House, 14th. October 1839.

In regard to Hermann, I can assure you that I have not been hard. The poor boy however does not know how to maintain friendships. You are right in saying that he is to be pitied, being left to fend for himself so young. His situation becomes more and more difficult. I think he supports his family and his professional life puts him in contact with some undesirables which is sad. Theatrical life is not good for a young man. He is right to accompany the singer Candida and he is well paid. He would be better off however if he confined himself to accompany her on the piano and not behind the scenes as well! I can't believe that he is not wasting a lot of time and money in that way. Hermann needs moral protection and example. I'm not in a position to provide him with this - you should do it, Hermann respects you and you would be doing him a great service."

But perhaps Liszt himself was in no position to direct others. The Princess herself bore Hermann no ill-will and concluded:

"For my part, I have nothing against the poor boy, and if I can be of any help to him I will."

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Hermann made some money on his London visit and in the following Spring he returned to Italy - to Milan. He wrote a short operatic work which he tried to stage in Verona but without success.

Perhaps its very failure was due to the religious content of his compositions which indeed had some merit. However he met with another mishap. His mother had continued to give him her support, even materially, but the Countess d'Agoult stepped up her intrigues against him. On November 30th. 1839 she wrote to Liszt as follows: "Puzzi is in love with the wife of a doctor and the young woman's parents have thrown him out."

She failed to see the similarity to her own case! On Dec. 6th. she returned to the attack:

"Hermann shows me respect and is anxious to be of service to me, but he is the vainest person I know. He doesn't know how to behave, has no real ability and demeans himself. I think when you return you should give him the brush-off. It's high time you cut adrift and gave him up as a bad job."

Liszt was on a tour of Europe giving concerts and earning money. Hermann was meanwhile sinking into debt and this annoyed Countess d'Agoult. Liszt however was not immediately influenced by her. He received Hermann in Prague and showed him around. The Countess was furious:

"What you tell me about Hermann really surprises me. It amazes me that you can treat so royally someone I have thrown out."

Liszt did not take her too seriously and no doubt he preferred the opinion of the Princess who had urged him to help the boy. Indeed we find Liszt coming across the Rhine bridge at Mainz in the early hours to rescue Hermann 'after he did something stupid', as Liszt wrote to the Princess of Sayn. He didn't even reply to the Countess's attacks

and we find him writing from Metz, where he now resided, to Franz Schubert:

"One of my old pupils, Monsieur Hermann has agreed to organize my concerts. This has been a great help to me."

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So here we find the two, reunited and working together. This did not at all please the Countess and she again wrote to Liszt on May 17th. "Your mother came this morning to give me further news of Hermann, which she heard from Ferco. If what she says is true this boy is utterly depraved".

So it was really gossip. Liszt was still not perturbed and took Hermann with him to Baden in Germany. From there they went to Hamburg where they met his older brother Louis Cohen. The Countess was still furious at her failure to have Hermann debunked and she wrote from Coblenz to a friend Lehmann in July 1840. (3)

"You know that Franz wants to have Hermann again organize his concerts. Hermann has not even succeeded in making a good job of this. He continues to gamble and has lost a thousand francs in a fortnight. His behaviour is as bad as ever. So he has been dismissed and I am going to send someone else from Paris to Franz."

No doubt she thought she had been successful this time but it didn't happen and Hermann remained with Liszt until the end of the year 1840. He then left for Venice. Liszt replied to the Countess, with whom he never lived again.

"Hermann is making a name for himself in Venice. He is involved with Miri an impresario, who wrote to me on the last page of Hermann's letter. They go around together."

Liszt realised that the Countess knew Miri and he was afraid she might use her acquaintance to damage Hermann's reputation again. So he urged her :

"When you write to Miri please refrain from saying spiteful things about him."

The Countess returned to the assault on January 18th. 1841.

"Shake down from the tree the Puzzi-caterpillars which are eating up the leaves."

She was referring to Liszt's earnings from his concerts. This time it worked. Much later in a long letter to Fr. Alphonse Ratisbonne relating his conversion, Herman referred to an unkind conspiracy that succeeded in separating him from Liszt and sowing seeds of hostility between the two. Eventually Liszt

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allowed himself to be won over. He began to take the Countess's accusations seriously and suspected Hermann of diverting some of his earnings for his own use. Hermann got in touch with his mother and gave her a copy of the accounts he kept of Liszt's concert earnings. His mother examined them and then gave them to Liszt pointing out that the Countess's accusations were at the very least greatly exaggerated. But Liszt refused to look at them and instead accepted the Countess's allegations. He wrote to her on December 7th. "Hermann has stolen more than fifteen hundred francs from me which were the proceeds of the first concert in Dresden, and nearly as much from my second concert. I do not wish to hear any more about him."

So where does the truth lie? To what extent was the conspiracy Hermann later mentioned bound up with accusations of theft? Was the great pianist Liszt a competent accountant? We have to ask ourselves if Hermann would try to deceive Fr. Ratisbonne after his conversion and hide the fact that he had robbed Liszt and instead talk of a 'conspiracy' as a cover-up? These are difficult questions for an objective historian. But there is no doubt that the repeated attacks by Marie d'Agoult, trying to get rid of Hermann, as well as the intemperate and aggressive tone of her words renders these attacks suspect. On the other hand when Hermann became a Catholic he confided in Fr. Ratisbonne and in fact sincerely related all his lapses, without hiding anything. Would he then fail on this point of issue? Hermann, writing to Fr. Ratisbonne could hardly have made up this "wicked conspiracy".

The idea of a conspiracy seems to be obvious in Marie d'Agoult's letters to her lover, subjective and spiteful as they were, by contrast with the kindly letters of Princess Belgiojoso. So there is no real proof that Hermann robbed his master, although he was capable of doing so. But it is certain that Liszt underwent a profound change in regard to Hermann and it was a most severe blow to him. He attempted a reconciliation in February 1843 but Liszt remained unmoved.

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Then there was a new twist to the story when Marie d'Agoult accused Hermann of being about to publicise some of Liszt's letters involving his women friends. Again Liszt believed her and was enraged. Marie d'Agoult won out but she was not to savour her triumph for long as Liszt eventually left her. As we shall see however Liszt and Hermann were later reconciled but circumstances had vastly changed.

At this point Hermann rejoined his mother and sister in Venice. She was a great support to him at this time and he passed a peaceful period with her, composing piano pieces and gaining popularity. In the spring we find them off again, first to Paris, then to London and back again to Venice. Hermann was really running away from himself. Later on when he became a Discalced Carmelite he would describe what this period of his life was like to the people of Paris who had come to listen to an account of his conversion. He used the image of a great storm in which 'my great loss appeared certain to me.' (See appendix, sermon at St. Sulpice.) Meanwhile his tortured soul could not gain any relief and he remained a prisoner of himself and of his passions and desires.

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(1) See 'Liszt' by Derek Watson, J.M.Dent and Sons Ltd. London 1989.

(2) Cfr. Ibid. P 40.

(3) Henri Lehmann was an artist and there are two separate portraits from this period (1839) of Franz Liszt and Marie d'Agoult in the Musee Carnavalet in Paris.