In 1771, a group of blind musicians performed at the Saint Ovid’s Fair in Paris. The musicians had come from the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts, an institution housing the blind and partially sighted, situated on the rue Saint-Honoré in Paris. They were regular performers at the Café des Aveugles (“café of the blind”) in the basement of the Palais Royal, and were often seen wandering the streets of Paris as individual performers or in bands. At this particular event, the blind were commissioned to dress as buffoons. An accompanying verse describes the scene: “It was lovely to hear these Blind people sing/And particularly nice to see them proud/Arguing as to who would give the best beat/To the songs that Paris flocked to listen to.” In the audience was the translator and philanthropist, Valentin Haüy (1745–1822), who went on to establish the Institut des Jeunes Aveugles (Institute of Blind Youth), the eventual home of Louis Braille, some five years later. He was horrified at the event, writing some years later that when he saw the concert he knew instantly that the blind could do much better:

Yes, I said to myself, seized with a noble enthusiasm, I will replace this ridiculous fable with truth. I will make the blind read. I will place in their hands volumes and instrumental parts that they have printed themselves. They will trace letters and read their own writing. I will even have them give harmonious concerts.

Haüy opened his unusual school for the blind, the Institute for Blind Youth, in 1784, and was acknowledged, at that time alongside the famous Abbot Charles Michel de l’Epée, who invented deaf sign.

Let us be permitted to pay homage to the talents and zeal of M. the Abbot de l’Epée who opened up the career of instruction to the Deaf
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and Mute; following his example M. Haüy became the benefactor of the blind to whom this suffering part of humanity owe the means of happiness that one was unable to hope for.³

He then dedicated his time to the development of raised reading characters for the blind that eventually led to Braille, as well as specific educational programmes for young blind pupils.

Haüy's school and his treatise on blind education appeared just at the time when linguistic visions began to enter the ideological political arena. In 1791, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand announced that a new form of French language would play a central role in developing the new French constitution. That language, as Sophia Rosenfeld has pointed out, “was the gestural and ‘methodical’ sign system developed in the preceding decades for the education of the deaf”.⁴ Haüy's work, though related to the deaf sign system was, however, much more squarely focused on sound rather than visual gesture. At the heart of his interest in developing sign systems for the blind was a belief that all citizens must engage in a more profound hearing process. When he saw the Quinze-Vingts musicians perform at the café, he was repelled by the sound of their music as much as the sight of the performance. By the time of the event, philosophical, scientific and artistic discussions about sound had reached their zenith. The composer and harmonist, Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1768), completed his highly influential and widely utilized, Code de musique pratique in 1761. This work outlined a comprehensive numerical musical system enabling instrumental musicians to create sophisticated improvisations in any form or genre.⁵ This was the culmination of over 50 years of work on the science of music, including the publication of his Traité de l’harmonie (Treatise of Harmony) in 1722. Etienne de Condillac (1714–1780), in 1746, had insisted in his Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines (Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge) that the development of modern language was dependent on the expansion of nuanced forms of sounds.⁶ He explained that the cri in primitive societies was quickly modified by a whole variety of timbral and rhythmic characteristics, “violent inflexions”, so that ideas might be more clearly and accurately expressed. From 1769, Haüy had worked as a freelance interpreter and code-breaker in fields as diverse as banking and the police, and in 1782, just prior to the opening of his school for young blind people, he was appointed official interpreter for the king, soon after becoming a member of Louis XVI's Bureau Académique d’Écriture.⁷ Haüy, like many other Enlightenment thinkers, understood music and language as sophisticated systems