

## SPOHR'S CANTATA 'THE CHRISTIAN'S PRAYER'

by Chris Tutt

One of the most attractive and inspired of Spohr's choral works is his setting of the poem 'Vater Unser' by Mahlmann. This was composed in 1829 for soloists, chorus and orchestra. As with most of Spohr's choral works the words were translated into English by Edward Taylor and the work was published in this country by Novello & Co. with the title 'The Christian's Prayer'. The keyboard arrangement for the vocal score was made by Vincent Novello. The setting is divided up as follows:-

- |      |  |
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| No.1 | Chorus. - In Heaven, O Jehovah! is fixed Thy throne.                 |
| No.2 | Soprano solo & Chorus. - Thy love is every morning new.              |
| No.3 | Chorus. - Thy boundless grace, O God! we praise.                     |
| No.4 | Soprano solo & Chorus. - All-gracious Father, heaven's<br>high Lord! |
| No.5 | Chorus. - O may Thy will be done on earth.                           |
| No.6 | Duet & Chorus. - O clothe our valleys with ripening corn.            |
| No.7 | Soli & Chorus. - O Lord, by heaven's bright armies<br>surrounded.    |
| No.8 | Bass solo & Chorus. - Thee, Lord! Thy creatures own -                |
| No.9 | Chorus. - For Thou art Lord.   |

A favourable review of this work appeared in the Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung in August 1831:

Many friends of true musical art will no doubt remember similar noble works from those better times for sacred music, when such masterpieces were more frequently heard and were regarded as the

jewels of our concerts.

Right from the start the first movement moves the soul and its truth of feeling makes a profound impression; an agreeable performance will give pleasure as long as humanity does not completely lose its sense of what is beautiful. Its natural goodness will not allow this to happen, however much it also forgets itself at times. It can be in too much of a hurry and let itself be stupefied, but it returns to the blessing of what is good. This indeed is what we hope for this work as well. Our attention is claimed by both its intellectual power and feeling expressed in the natural manner which is particularly characteristic of the composer and which distinguishes him.

The first petition is sung with gentle cheerfulness; this would hardly correspond with the subject matter, if the composer had not understood how, through the harmonic twists he loves, to add to the amiable  $\frac{3}{4}$  manner a necessary, and therefore fitting, shudder of adoration at the invocation of the Almighty's name. The third movement, extended by repetitions, ushers in a more dignified, calm and confident joyousness of feeling. The beautiful vocal line is emphasised by the richer figuration of the instrumental accompaniment. Particularly effective is the way that the superb choice of harmonies brings a penetrating insight into the biblical words, as indeed should be the case.

In the third petition (Larghetto  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) the solo soprano calls down the angels of Heaven to Earth, while the choir diffidently and

SOLO.—SOPRANO.

All - gra-cibus Fa-ther, Heav'n's high Lord, from  
thee all good, all joy de - scend - eth,

quietly praises the all-embracing wisdom and power of the Everlasting, conscious of the weakness of Mankind, as it wanders in night, only able to obtain salvation from above. The elegaic song full of feeling moves into the major key, bringing a more joyful mood, and leads to the words of the third

petition in a short fugal movement, which we would have gladly done without and seen exchanged for something else.

The following duet "Lass Aehren reifen im Sonnenstrahl" is very attractive and with what simple dignity the petition itself is introduced by the chorus! The Adagio for the four soloists with echoing chorus, in which only very few notes of accompaniment by the orchestra are heard, mostly in rhythmic figures, is so expressive of humility and so attractive in its fervour, that it could scarcely

ever be heard without making an impressive effect. No less full of feeling is the bass solo with choral entry for the seventh petition, which is followed at once by the Allegro in  $\frac{3}{2}$  time with a powerful and skilfully executed fugue, portraying confidence and faith.

No. 9.

CHORUS.—FOR THOU ART LORD.

*Allegro.*  $\text{♩} = 100.$

- - vil. For thou art Lord, and thou art  
 vil, For thou art Lord, and thou art  
 - - vil, For thou art Lord, and thou art  
 - - vil. For thou art Lord, and thou art

*Allegro.*  
 God our Fa - - - ther, and thine is the  
 God our . . . Fa - - - ther, and thine is the  
 God our . . . Fa - - - ther, and thine is the  
 God our . . . Fa - - - ther, and thine . . . is the

king - dom, the pow'r . . . and the glo - ry,  
 king - dom, the pow'r and the glo - ry,  
 king - dom, the pow'r . . . and the glo - ry,  
 king - - dom, the pow'r and the glo - ry,

The splendid instrumentation is simple and noble, nowhere in the least overloaded, yet extremely effective. Everywhere one recognizes the Master's sure touch. Just in the same way it is also not unnecessarily difficult, because it is not turgid; its beauty is not measured according to its Turkish adornments, weighed according to its

bulk, valued for its deafening noise, nor looked at with dazzled eyes. Only very rarely are all 23 lines filled with notes and very rarely is the whole orchestra at full cry. Such skilful economy is successful. A clamour of sound is easily made, but music is better.

The piano edition is so simple and playable and yet at the same time supports the vocal lines so well, that it leaves nothing to be desired. It is by Gampon. The printing is very clear. Even if we also noticed a few printing errors, they are of such a kind that they scarcely need to be pointed out. So it is with great pleasure that we draw the attention of the musical public to a work that should be given a hearing frequently and in every region. How can one hesitate for a moment, let alone for years, between foreign jangling and such gifts of the Muses? Certainly it gives no scope for dancing or frenzy. A week ago the work was given in Erfurt at the second great Music Festival of the Thüringisch-Sächsischer Verein. May it be heard in all regions of Germany and achieve the success it deserves!

The only version of this splendid work that is available at present for the listener is a tape recording with rather poor sound quality of a performance of the German original, but with some cuts. This is, I think, taken from a concert in 1959 for the Centenary of Spohr's death. It is still enough to enable one to feel its quality as a work well worth reviving.