

by Chris Tutt

Although 1984 is far from over yet, most of the Spohr events in Britain that can be attributed to the Bicentenary have already happened, so it is possible to make some assessment of the achievements so far. There has of course been the broadcasting of a number of little-known works for which we must be very grateful to Anthony Friese-Greene of BBC Radio 3. As far as live performances are concerned London has seen most of the action. By far the most significant Spohr event this year has been the production of the opera 'Faust' by University College Opera at the Bloomsbury Theatre in February. In spite of the lukewarm attitude of the newspaper critics this production must have persuaded most of those who actually attended that Spohr is a composer worth taking seriously. Another major work to receive its first full-scale performance in London for a long time was the oratorio 'The Last Judgement', put on by the Chelsea Harmonic Society on April 4th. It is a pity that there have not been more performances of it this year - it could have sounded splendid in one of the Proms in the Albert Hall. Another fine work that had not been heard in a concert for many years is the Double Quartet no.4 in G minor, which was given by the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Chamber Ensemble on April 29th. The Radio 3 broadcast on September 2nd will give those who have missed it so far a further chance to hear this beautiful and subtle work and it will be available on record soon. London has also had opportunities to hear two works which have already been heard from time to time in recent years, the 'Gesangszene' and the Concerto for String Quartet and Orchestra.

Various works have been heard elsewhere in Britain, mostly works that are already in the repertoire. Particularly welcome were the performances of Spohr's 2nd Symphony at Kidderminster and Ross-on-Wye by the Orchestra da Camera and of the String Quartet in E minor, Op.45/2, by the Derbyshire String Quartet at Doncaster. It was also enterprising of the Music Department of Leicester University to put on Spohr's 1st, 2nd and 5th Piano Trios. As I mentioned in a recent newsletter, it has been disappointing that none of the major orchestras has done anything to mark the Spohr Bicentenary. If a symphony or a violin concerto might have been too risky from the commercial point of view, at least an overture could have been considered. These orchestras do seem to stick very much to the established repertoire, with a few modern works thrown in from time to time to keep the Arts Council happy! It was shameful that none of them acknowledged the Raff Centenary in 1982, when Raff's best symphonies are so well written for a big orchestra and have obvious audience appeal!

It is a matter of pride for the Society that our members have been able to do something to encourage more live performances of Spohr's music. Clive Brown with his expertise as a scholar and a performer has had the greatest influence in this respect. He was the instigator of the production of 'Faust', taking part himself as leader of the orchestra, and of the performances of the 2nd Symphony by the Orchestra da Camera. The Spohr Piano Trio, in which he is the violinist, has played the 2nd and 3rd trios and has just taken the 5th into its repertoire. He has written about 'Faust' for 'The Musical Times' and given a radio talk about Spohr's music on 'Music Weekly'. His book about Spohr should be available in two or three months and will fill a significant gap. Lady Mayer's book 'The Forgotten Master' is a straight biography of Spohr with only incidental references to his compositions. 'Louis Spohr - Bilder und Dokumente seiner Zeit' by

Herfried Homburg and the more recent compilation 'Louis Spohr - Avantgardist des Musiklebens seiner Zeit' with a major contribution from Hartmut Becker do both discuss Spohr's music and draw attention to certain major works, but neither would claim to be comprehensive surveys of his output and are only available in German. Both David Branson and Martin Eastick have played Spohr piano works in concerts this year and there are reviews of them elsewhere in this Journal. Philip Scowcroft, continuing his championship of Spohr's music in Doncaster over many years, asked the Derbyshire String Quartet to play Op.45/2 there this year. Apart from these live performances it is worth mentioning that Mr.A.Engel presented a programme of Spohr's music on records to the Southport Gramophone Society on June 7th. It consisted of the 'Jessonda' overture, the 3rd Symphony, the Concertante in G for Violin, Harp and Orchestra, the 1st Clarinet Concerto and the 'Gesangszene'.

There has certainly been a good deal of Spohr's music on the radio during the last year. The works available on record have of course been heard from time to time, but a considerable number of others have been recorded for broadcasting, in many cases for the first time, and I would like to discuss these. In the field of orchestral music the 6th and 8th Symphonies, the 7th Violin Concerto, the Potpourri on Irish themes for Violin and Orchestra, the overtures to 'Faust' and 'Die Prüfung' and the Concert Overture in F have been heard. The 7th Violin Concerto is very welcome as one of Spohr's finest works and the excellent performance by Valery Gradow makes one all the more surprised that this concerto is not generally available on disc whereas there are several current versions of the 'Gesangszene'. Perhaps No.7 does not have quite the immediate appeal of No.8 and it may be harder for a violinist to learn. The opening concert of the Radio 3 Spohr Bicentenary series also included the Symphony No.8 in G. This has the added interest that like the Symphony No.2 in D minor it was written for the Philharmonic Society of London. It does raise the question of extent to which Spohr's creativity went into a decline in his later years. The slow introduction to the first movement is very impressive, though in a manner familiar in a number of earlier works, and leads into a sonata movement based on two broadly similar lyrical themes. Some contrast is provided by a more rhythmic bridge passage and some strenuous fugato writing in the development, but there are no big climaxes. There are plenty of delightful touches of harmony and instrumentation for Spohr enthusiasts to enjoy, but it is not likely to convert the unbelievers. The slow movement however with its funeral march rhythm and its sombre colouring leaves no doubts and can surely stand comparison with anything by Mendelssohn and Schumann. The third movement too is most attractive with its piquant rhythms and clever use of solo instruments. Unlike some earlier symphonic scherzos which are strongly influenced by Beethoven this one is thoroughly individual in style. The finale has some attractive melodies, but does not seem wholly convincing and one can feel a certain discrepancy between form and content. The other symphony to be heard was No.6 in G, 'The Historical', in a 'Midday Concert' given by the BBC Concert Orchestra on July 20th. This was the Spohr symphony chosen by the BBC for the Centenary in 1959, but is generally regarded as the poorest of the nine. There is criticism of the choice of the 6th and 9th Symphonies for the new German recording on the Signal label. I find the 'The Historical' has some pleasant music in it, but the whole concept of imitating the styles of earlier periods is in doubtful taste. I would have preferred the BBC to have chosen another of the symphonies, but perhaps as a comparatively short work it was the one that could fit into that particular slot.

So far Spohr's vocal music has not featured much in the broadcasts. From his large output of songs only the 6 songs for baritone, violin

and piano, Op.154, and 'Der erste Kuss' from Op.41 have been heard. The Op.154 songs are remarkably good for the last published work in his output, dating from 1856, and the final song 'Abendstille' is wonderfully serene and makes a moving farewell to Spohr's public career as a composer. Even the setting of 'Erlkönig', though not as vivid as Schubert's famous version, has real merit. On the other hand I was not very impressed by 'Der erste Kuss' and I would have rather heard some of the other songs from Op.41. We have not yet heard a Spohr opera on Radio 3. An opera is by far the most expensive type of work to produce, but, even if the BBC does not want to mount its own production of one, it should be possible to get hold of German radio recordings of 'Faust' and 'Zemire und Azor'. I would also welcome a talk with excerpts from several Spohr operas like one done a number of years ago about Marschner's operas. We have, however, been able to hear a fine concert aria by Spohr, 'E mi lasci così', which is typical of some of the set piece soprano arias in the operas. From Spohr's choral works the Mass in C, Op.54, was broadcast on July 24th in a performance by the BBC Singers directed by John Poole and there is the possibility that the oratorio 'The Fall of Babylon' may be broadcast later in the year.

Radio 3 has presented a reasonable cross-section of Spohr's chamber music. The larger mixed chamber works, the Nonet, Octet and Septet, which are available on record and in modern printed editions, have been heard, including a fine live broadcast of the Nash Ensemble playing the Octet at the Bath Festival on May 29th. His works for strings alone have been represented by studio performances of the Sextet late last year and of the Quatuor Brillant, Op.43, and the Quintet, Op.91, in May. There was also a broadcast in April of a lunch-time concert which included Spohr's Duo for 2 Violins, Op.39/3, thus representing another significant area in Spohr's output. I was pleased with the Quintet in A minor, Op.91, as a representative from his seven string quintets. I would still agree that Op.69 is perhaps the best of them, but Op.91 has much to commend it. It has a measure of both Spohr's elegaic lyricism and healthy vigour; also the first violin does not have such a dominant role as elsewhere. I was rather disappointed that out of his 36 string quartets one of the 'solo' quartets was selected, but Op.43 has some fine melodies in it. The first movement does not sound particularly 'concerto-like', apart from one passage reminiscent of the 'Gesangszene', and could well have come from one of the 'straight' quartets. The finale seemed to involve the other instruments in the argument quite a lot, but I do find the movement rather long for its material. From Spohr's chamber works that include a piano part we have heard the Piano Trio No.2, Op.123, and the Duet for Violin and Piano, Op.96. The Trio is probably the best of the five and deserves a place in the Piano Trio repertoire. Spohr's works for violin and piano have up to now received no attention, with nothing available in print and no modern performances. Op.96 is a curiosity as a piece of chamber music with a programme which is accomodated to a conventional 4 movement structure. It has the title 'Reminiscences of a Journey to Dresden and Saxon Switzerland' and the programme gives an unusual flavour to the scherzo and finale. It is very pleasant to listen to and in places gives the impression of salon music. We have also heard Spohr's two works for piano solo, the Sonata, Op.125, and the Rondoletto, Op.149, which are both attractively written. I like the scherzo of the Sonata very much, but find the finale rather dull.

What then has been achieved towards our goal of getting Spohr recognized as a significant composer of his period and bringing his best works into the repertoire? I am sure that, compared with a year ago, there are far fewer music lovers who could say, "Who's this Spohr? I've never heard of him!" However we are a long way from getting the majority

of musicians and music lovers to take Spohr's music seriously. There is for instance a lack of first class records of his music and several recently issued records have been disappointing. We can wholeheartedly welcome the recent issues of the Nash Ensemble playing the Nonet, Octet, Septet and the Quintet for piano and wind, Antony Pay in the 1st and 2nd Clarinet Concertos, and Pierre Amoyal playing the 'Gesangszene' and the Concertante in G for Violin, Harp and Orchestra. The forthcoming issue of the Double Quartets from the Academy of St.Martin-in-the-Fields Chamber Ensemble on Hyperion is an important step forward. It has been surprising that up to now few records of Spohr's music have come from Germany. Several companies there, particularly ORFEO, are taking the plunge and it will be a great step forward for Spohr's cause when 'Faust' is available on records. But why has Deutsche Grammophon so neglected Spohr?

When we consider what is reasonable to expect in the propagation of Spohr's music, we must set realistic goals. As devotees of his music we should like to be able to hear at some time most of the works, but there are very few of them are likely to remain permanently in the repertoire after revival. Already the Nonet, the Octet, the Quintet for piano and wind, the 1st Double Quartet and the Op.103 songs are reasonably well known. In chamber music the challenge is to get one or two of the quartets back into the repertoire. Most of the established string quartets seem to know nothing about Spohr and, if they see a score of his, they point to what they consider faults of style and think it not worth the effort to learn such demanding works, when they have such a big repertoire anyway. I am convinced that such works as Op.29/1, Op.45/2 and Op.74/3 can make an appeal to the average chamber music audience, perhaps in the Music Societies rather than at the Universities, where the emphasis tends to be on modern works.

In the orchestral field only the Clarinet Concerto No.1 can be considered even on the fringe of the regular repertoire. We must try to push the 2nd Symphony, the 1st and 2nd Clarinet Concertos and the 7th Violin Concerto as works that all the medium-sized orchestras should attempt. A significant work that has not emerged at all so far is Symphony No.4, 'The Consecration of Sound'. Although it is an uneven work, it is the Spohr symphony which has the best chance of capturing the attention of concert audiences with its splendid orchestration and strong contrasts. Also several scores and sets of parts are available in libraries in this country. So I would like to set an aim for the next few years of getting large orchestras to perform 'The Consecration of Sound' and of having it recorded. The conductors of the large orchestras should also be encouraged to try the overtures to 'Faust', 'Jessonda' and 'The Alchemist'. This is not something that can be achieved quickly. The major orchestras have busy schedules and are booked up well ahead. If a number of us agree about which works by Spohr should be publicised and we make the most of any opportunities to influence conductors and concert promoters, we can make good progress. We should concentrate on a few works which are most likely to impress musicians and appeal to the average concert-goer. I suggest Symphony No.4 rather than No.5 because, although I think that No.5 is the better work, No.4 is likely to have more audience appeal.

What can we do as individual members of the Spohr Society to further the aims of the Society? An important thing that all of us can do is to support as fully as we can Clive Brown's book and the Hyperion records of the Double Quartets when they come out. Besides buying them ourselves we can encourage any friends that might be interested to buy them or give them as Christmas presents and also order them from our local libraries, so that they buy copies too. We can take some pride in the support we have given the Hyperion issue through the Spohr Record

Fund. Those of us with the contacts can continue to encourage other musicians to consider which works by Spohr would suit their particular requirements. When musicians do include more unusual Spohr works in their concerts, let us try to support them as much as possible and thank them. I shall try to put as much information as I can into the newsletters about forthcoming containing works by Spohr or other composers we may be interested in. Please don't forget the piano duet concert with works by Czerny, Onslow and Moscheles at Hammerwood Park on September 22nd. Do look out for the 1984/85 prospectuses of orchestras, choirs, music clubs etc. to see if they contain anything of interest to the Society and, if you can, please let me have the information. We must make sure that the revivals for the Bicentenary are not short-lived and that Spohr's music does not fall back into neglect.