

MOSCHELES ON SPOHR - a contemporary's view of the man and his music

by Michael Hopf

The diaries and correspondence of the pianist and composer Ignaz Moscheles contain some interesting references to Spohr both as a person and as a composer:-

At the end of 1820, Moscheles is in Paris. He writes:

"Going out for a morning walk on the 30th (December), whom should I meet but my friend Spohr - a good omen! Our joy on meeting was mutual, we were a long time together, and sauntered on the Boulevard des Italiens. Later in the day, I accompanied to the Palais Royal, and in the evening we heard 'Don Juan' at the Italian Opera "

Moscheles and Spohr frequently met at the house of Baron Poiféré de Cère, who gave morning parties every Sunday. We read that Spohr had entrusted Moscheles at one of his matinées with the pianoforte part of his quintet (with wind instruments), which was greatly applauded by the audience. Moscheles revered Spohr and was annoyed that the French did not fully partake in this reverence:

"Why does fail to awaken general enthusiasm here? Will the French, from a feeling of national pride, acknowledge none but their own violin school? Or is Spohr too little communicative, too retiring for the Paris fashionable world? Enough that today he has been obliged to give up his intended evening concert from want of public interest; this really pains me. Yesterday, at a soirée at the Valentins, he played in his E flat, which passed without the applause it well deserved - a man like Spohr!"

Again we read:

"At Baillot's, who had got up for Spohr and myself a genuine soirée of artists, he was greeted with real enthusiasm. I also played and improvised. He played, I played, and we each shared in a brotherly way the applause of this select audience."

The next we read of Spohr is in 1827 when Moscheles visits him at Cassel. At Cassel he writes:

"I am so delighted at seeing Spohr again, the consciousness that I understand this great man, the mutual interest we take in each

other's performances - all this is delightful. His garden is charming even in winter."

On the 8th of January he assists him in making his concert arrangements. On the following day we read:

"Today Hauptmann, Gerke, and others met at Spohr's, and there was no end of music.

On 10th of January with Spohr at Wilhelmsöhe, and dined at his house."

Several years later in 1843 when Moscheles is busy making a name for himself in England, another happy encounter takes place:

"The arrival of Spohr, the king of violinists, created a considerable sensation in London, where his great artistic gifts met with a very wide spread recognition. The musical societies in London vied with each other in welcoming the great musician. His 'Macbeth', his 'Weihe der Töne', and the oratorio 'The Fall of Babylon', were performed under his own direction. We artists, making up a party of ninety, gave him a grand dinner at Greenwich; I was placed next to him to interpret the proceedings and numerous speeches; I also accompanied him in three of his manuscript duets. In my improvisation at a later period of the evening I endeavoured to be completely 'Spohrish', and worked up themes out of his Symphony, 'The Consecration of Sound'."

A grand party in his honour was given by the Moscheles, and another by Mr. Alsager. The music was Spohr throughout, and Moscheles played his Quintet. He says:

"You know our friend is not demonstrative, but after the first movement he came to the piano to shake hands with me. Halle turned over the leaves, whilst all the native and foreign pianists in London formed the audience. Spohr's 'Nonet' was a great treat! so finely played too by the author, now a man of fifty nine years of age!"

Two years later at Bonn, Moscheles is enthralled with the way "almost faultlessly" Spohr directs a Beethoven concert which includes the 9th Symphony.

Their last recorded meetings seem to have taken place in Leipzig where Moscheles, at the invitation of his friend Mendelssohn, had taken up a post in the newly formed Conservatory.

"Returning to Leipzig," he says, "I found Spohr - he played in Voigt's house, that place of rendezvous for good musicians, his Quartet in C major and Double Quartet in G minor, both from the proof sheets, the composition as interesting as ever, but Spohr unchanged; his playing is still noble and fresh. In the Conservatoire we gave him an ovation, and his bust was covered with garlands; he played several things to a delighted audience, and our pupils gave him a serenade afterwards."

Following a further concert at Leipzig in 1850, Moscheles makes the following comments on Spohr's 7th and 9th Symphonies:

"Spohr's Symphony for double Orchestra 'Irdisches und Göttliches im Menschenleben' has a subject worthy of Beethoven; but the artificial construction cramps the free output of feeling ... "

and of the same symphony;

"The work," says Moscheles, "has all the great qualities which one knows and loves in Spohr: beautiful treatment of the subjects, admirable modulation and instrumentation, but there is a want of

novelty in the leading ideas, and I should like more episodes and contrasts; so much unity leads to monotony. It may satisfy the harmonist, but there is too much sameness throughout. The orchestra played zealously and 'con amore', but the work was only moderately applauded."

Again, Moscheles draws comparisons with Beethoven when discussing Spohr's 9th Symphony:

"Spohr is still complete master of his violin, and conducted his 'Seasons' with great precision. The invention in this work is weak, but the treatment and instrumentation are as artistic as ever. The 'Coming of Spring' has a lovely melody, but art and counterpoint outweigh the poetic vein. The music drags on slowly like a cart through deep sand, one wheel creaking and groaning; the 'Autumn' has its share of brightness, and the Rheinlied is cleverly interwoven in the movement. The contrapuntal links of the different subjects interest the thoughtful artist, but fail to elevate him as does the music of a certain Beethoven."

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