

EDWARD TAYLOR AND SPOHR

by Clive Brown

Taylor's connection with Spohr is of considerable importance in understanding press attitudes towards his music, particularly in the late 1830s and early 1840s.

The Taylors of Norwich possessed considerable local influence, and members of the family served in all the important positions of civic government. Edward Taylor was sheriff of Norwich in 1819 and one of the founders of the Norwich Festival in 1824. In 1825 he removed to London where along with his brother and another partner he set up as a civil engineer. He had been a keen amateur musician, and lack of success in business caused him to take up music professionally in 1827. He became critic of The Spectator in 1829 and combined this with a singing career. In 1830 The Monthly Musical and Literary Journal remarked of his singing in a benefit concert for the widow and children of Mr. Gledhill:

Miss Cramer and Mr. E. Taylor sang the duet of Crudel Perché with great feeling and science. Mr. Taylor's voice is of an excellent quality, and the taste with which he sings displays an intimate acquaintance with the science he professes.

This is of particular interest since in 1843 when he had become the butt of much critical animosity The Morning Post claimed that 'as a bass singer he has been rarely known to sing in time, and in tune never'.

In April 1830 The Harmonicon reviewing a Philharmonic concert observed: 'The duet from Spohr's Berggeist (O calma o bella) is a delightful composition (for the introduction of which we are indebted to Mr. E. Taylor) and augurs a beneficial change in the vocal arrangements of these concerts'. And later in that year Taylor was responsible for the first performance of The Last Judgement in England at the Norwich Festival. His deep admiration for Spohr's music was beyond question; his nephew P. M. Taylor recalled his own reaction on meeting Spohr, and his uncle's opinion, in 1886, saying: 'When I looked at his stolid German countenance and burly frame, I felt some difficulty in believing him to be a great composer, but my uncle placed Spohr in the first rank of great musical writers'. T. D. Eaton described Taylor's feelings in 1830 and the inception of his friendship with Spohr. He wrote:

After the performance of 'The Last Judgement', Mr. Taylor had a strong desire to become personally acquainted with Spohr, and one day getting an invitation from Mendelssohn to visit him and his family, at Dusseldorf on the Rhine, where Spohr then was, the invitation was accepted, and thus Mr. Taylor first became known to the illustrious composer, with whom he formed a friendship which lasted as long as they both lived.

The part which Taylor played in introducing Spohr's oratorios to England and his partisanship for his music are well known. In order to understand the animosity which he aroused among other journalists, however, it is necessary to take a more general view of his career after 1830. In 1837 the professorship of music at Gresham College became vacant and Taylor was appointed to fill the post despite the candidature of several distinguished musicians. It was widely felt that he had obtained the appointment by influence rather than by merit.

since his brother was an alderman of the city; The Musical World referred in 1843 to 'indignation at the unmerited exaltation which Professor Taylor has obtained in his profession by means of excessive assumption and officiousness'. At the same time Taylor, who was a notable liberal, had incurred a great deal of political enmity over his advocacy of reform, so there were many, both inside and outside the musical world who would not have been sorry to see him humbled. He had also alienated certain sections of the musical profession by the causes which he advocated and those which he condemned. His special interest apart from Spohr lay in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century church music, Italian and English madrigals and particularly in the music of Henry Purcell; these were unfashionable interests at this period. Davison was often scathing about this sort of music, and Taylor's championship of Purcell was seen as especially pernicious when it was allied to depreciation of Mendelssohn. In 1843 he was accused of deliberately excluding Mendelssohn's St. Paul from the Norwich Festival, and it is undoubtably true that Taylor ranked both Spohr and Purcell considerably higher than Mendelssohn, for he observed in a letter to T.D. Eaton in 1847;

the more I know of Purcell the more true do I find Dr. Beckwith's remark to me when, as a boy, I was expressing my admiration of his music, "The longer you live, and the more you will admire him." But what know or care his countrymen about him? Nothing. We are going to put up a statue to Mendelssohn - a foreigner - who had not a tithe of Purcell's genius, but the English Orpheus is forgotten.

However, perhaps Taylor's mortal sin in the eyes of the rising generation of music critics was his apparent lack of sympathy for the efforts of young English composers. This, combined with all the other grounds for enmity, made him a prime target for the spleen of the group of anti-establishment critics who were centred round Davison. Towards the end of the 1830s attacks from this quarter began to come blatantly into the open. One attack which was only thinly disguised under a veil of sarcasm and irony occurred in a letter to The Musical World in 1839. It is worth quoting at length on account of the light which it sheds not only on the effect of Taylor's championship of Spohr and the grounds upon which Davison's faction founded their antipathy, but also because it reveals some of their attitude towards others of their fellow musicians, particularly those of the older generation. The letter is a curious one since it was clearly written by Davison or by one of his close associates and is thus a triple deception; for The Harmonist was edited by Davison and the review of The Harmonist in The Era, from which a portion was quoted in the letter, was also by Davison. The remarks about Davison and Smart in a footnote to the letter seem merely designed to put the reader off the scent, since it is evident that far from believing the critic of The Era to be 'calumniating' the writer was on agreement with him on every point. The letter observed:

In a criticism on "The Harmonist", alluding to two compositions by Spohr, which appeared in the last part of that miscellany, the following gross and ridiculous allusion to the highly respected and profoundly theoretical Gresham Professor is made:- "Spohr is very popular just now, from having been lately exhibited at Norwich, by the erudite Professor Taylor, who with the best feelings (perhaps) for the reputation of his friend, takes, we humbly opine, the very surest method to make him look ridiculous. But every great man, it seems, must have a toady (!!), upon whom he may practise his jokes, vent his spleen, and exercise his wit; and who, when the great man pronounces

"that's fine," must echo with energy "mighty fine!" As Johnson had his Boswell, as Mendelssohn has his Klingermann, as Moscheles has his Ayrton, so we presume, Spohr must have his Taylor."(!!!)

Can anything, Mr. Editor, be imagined more atrociously indecent, more unjustly calumniating, more indefensibly misrepresenting plain matter of fact, than the above quoted paragraph? The holy and respectable alliance between two of the greatest minds in modern Europe, to be designated toadyism!! What?-"is there no virtue extant," is there no gratitude on the face of the globe? Shall the man who has done so much for his species; who has so often effected, by his lectures, that which many of the profoundest professors of Mesmerism have failed to attain; who has proved to us, as an observant and impartial spectator, that there is no such thing as music in England; that Sterndale Bennett owes all his reputation, and the patronage of the Philharmonic to "back-stairs influence," being possessed of no talent whatever; that Macfarren is an imposter, and his music, trumpery. Shall the man who has done and proved so much for our edification, be thus exposed to the jeers and unjust insinuations of an obscure musical critic; a critic who has disgraced himself by an impertinent and wholesale abuse of the sublime music of Thalberg; which gentleman, according to one of your correspondents last week, has a greater musical organization than Mozart!!- What would follow if such remarks were allowed to go unnoticed, it were impossible to surmise. We shall next have the musical knowledge of Hogarth called into question; or the profundity of Parry; or the orchestral skill of Hullah; or the madrigalian researches of Oliphant; or the genius of Louis Emmanuel; or the modesty of Eliason; or the acuteness of Gruneisen; or the retiredness of Chorley; or the bashfulness of Gratton Cooke; or the horn playing of Hopgood; or the imagination of Rooke; or the counter-point of Romer; or the impartiality of the Philharmonic; or, worse than all, the fugue writing of Dr. Essex!:

I trust therefore, Mr. Editor, that, out of respect due from every musician to the astute and philosophic personage, Professor Taylor, to say nothing of a reverence for public morals, you will exercise your editorial whip over the literary shoulders of the calumniating critic in the Era...

In 1843 Taylor's reputation was severely shaken by the so-called 'madrigal controversy'. This affair centred round a charge of plagiarism which was levelled at him in respect of a madrigal which he had submitted for a prize offered by the Western Madrigal Society in 1842; his entry had won the prize, but it had then been discovered that a section of some twelve bars was identical to a passage from a madrigal by Marenzio. This was pointed out to Taylor who claimed that he must have sent in the wrong copy. His story was that, on hearing of the competition, he had looked up some old exercises and found one which he thought worthy of entry, but it contained the bars from Marenzio because, as he explained, it had been his practice to work passages from genuine madrigals into his exercises. Before submitting the madrigal, however, he claimed that he had composed a new and entirely original section to replace the borrowed passage and had the madrigal recopied, but that the wrong copy had been sent in error. Why he remained unaware of the error until it was brought to his notice by the committee of the madrigal society was not satisfactorily explained, especially since he had been present when the prize madrigal was sung through by the society. In his defence, however, it is only fair to state that he himself had been the editor of a volume containing the Marenzio madrigal in question

which he knew to be in constant use by the society. Whether Taylor had practiced a deliberate deception or not will probably never be known, but to those who sought a stick with which to beat him the circumstantial evidence was quite sufficient to destroy his credibility.

The scandalous implications of this affair removed all restraint from Taylor's critics and a torrent of abuse was loosed onto the head of the 'madrigalian Martyr' as he was derisively called. The Musical World branded him as 'the greatest enemy to rising British musical talent whose unkindly lucubrations have ever disgraced the press of England'. (This was a category in which Chorley was also placed, for a footnote added: 'Always excepting the ignorant and conceited scribbler of the Athenaeum, who by the intolerable twaddle with which he hebdomadally deluges that print, has brought it into universal contempt among artists.') The Morning Post and The Britannia were also implacable and in the latter a similar point was made; it claimed: 'it is flagrant that he has, in the Spectator, spared not a British composer, and, with a pen steeped in gall, attacked alternately John Barnett, Balfe, Rooke, Sterndale Bennett, and Sir George Smart.' This critic had also referred sarcastically to Taylor as 'a clever writer' and The Musical World took up this point saying:

It is surely a discovery exclusively of the Britannia's that Professor Taylor is a clever writer. The truth is he writes essays about as well as he writes madrigals. Why - we should as soon think of dubbing the musical editor of the Athenaeum (who can scarcely construct an intelligible paragraph) a clever writer - as Mr. Taylor. A clever writer, by no means, unless it be of other men's ideas, ideas - as in the case of Luca Marenzio, with whose praises we are absolutely nauseated - about as poverty stricken as his own.

The Morning Post expanded upon the implications of Taylor's connection with Spohr, commenting:

Mr. E. Taylor, a very clever amateur, has made a very poor professor. Henry Purcell and Spohr have been his stock in trade - to make the former pass current he burked Handel - to exploiter the latter he has tried to stifle Mendelssohn, and to secure his own ends he has abused everybody save his own clique. To crush the rising talent of England has been his great aim, and unfortunately he did enjoy a prestige to do harm, until the prize madrigal exposure burst upon the public, discovering a mass of unparalleled ignorance, which for the honour of English composers it is hoped will never occur again. Spohr has paid the penalty of this unfortunate connection, but we acquit him from any participation in the exclusion of Mendelssohn's Paul from the Norwich Festival. The misfortune is that Spohr's works have been so jobbed in this country.

In 1843 he resigned his post on The Spectator and despite his continued tenure of the Gresham professorship he effectively ceased to be an important influence in the musical world. It may be worth noting that his innocence was believed in by the editor of The Spectator, who replied to Taylor's letter of resignation expressing obviously sincere regret at his departure, describing his career as 'honourably and usefully distinguished' and observing that 'a selection from your writings in the 'Spectator' ... would comprise a body of the soundest and best musical criticism in the language; and when you retire, I know not that any second man in England is qualified to sustain the elevated standard that you have raised'.

As to whether Spohr's connection with Taylor had any significant effect upon his reputation in the long run, it is virtually impossible to arrive at a firm conclusion. However, there were those, especially among Taylor's friends, who believed that it had. One of these was T.D. Eaton, and though it seems likely that he overstated the case, it is nevertheless important to take account of his view, particularly since it offers an alternative explanation of the reasons for the enmity which Taylor had incurred from so many of his contemporaries. Eaton made no mention in his memoir of Taylor of the madrigal affair, but it may be presumed that he accepted Taylor's innocence in the matter. He wrote:

But when it began to be discovered that Professor Taylor was not only earnest, but successful, in his endeavours to create a taste for good music in the people; that he constantly held up the noblest examples in his art to their admiration; and that he exposed mediocrity, wherever he found it, however popular it might be, the professional mind became rather uneasy. The worshippers of 'the great goddess Diana' (though of course there were many honourable exceptions) began to be jealous of this new apostle, who had so lately sprung from the ranks of the amateurs. But this was not all. It was found out that the sound and honest criticisms in the Spectator - the best that were published in this country - proceeded from his pen; and moreover that it was not correct for 'a professional man' to 'sit in judgement' upon his musical brethren.' Had Professor Taylor condescended merely to puff 'his musical brethren,' both in and out of season, doubtless the thing would have been deemed 'correct' enough. But he felt it his duty, as Gresham Professor of Music, to instruct the people by all the means in his power - without, as well as within, the walls of his own theatre. He would thus be carrying out the noble intentions of the founder. He thought, too, that the Profession ought to be for the Art, as well as the Art for the Profession. Fatal mistake! 'Continuo venti volvunt mare.' Immediately the sky began to lower. He was not the man to be openly attacked, but his influence might be secretly undermined. Without exactly knowing how, or why, he must have felt a chill and blight around him. The press which had set up Spohr as an idol, now began to damn that illustrious composer with 'faint praise.' The innocent public, who swallow music as they swallow medicine (because it is prescribed for them) without understanding how one or the other is composed, began to find out that the compositions which they had once admired, or at least affected to admire, were 'really somewhat dull.' But thoughtful men, who knew the intrinsic value of Spohr's compositions, remembered that he was the friend of Professor Taylor; and that Taylor had laid the foundation of his fame in this country by bringing out his splendid oratorios at the Norwich Festivals. This of itself was significant, but this was not all. Mendelssohn, a musician of vast learning, indefatigable industry, and consummate skill so far as construction is concerned, at length entered the lists with Spohr as a composer of oratorios. Of Mendelssohn's 'Songs without Words,' of his 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' and of his pianoforte and some other instrumental compositions, it would be difficult to speak too highly. There are two opinions of his merits as an oratorio writer. His first oratorio, 'St. Paul,' can scarcely be called a success. His 'Elijah' was always a favourite with the public, and it contains some good descriptive music; indeed, description was Mendelssohn's strong point. Some of the press, however, not content with giving this oratorio the praise which was its due, affected to consider 'Elijah' inferior indeed

to the 'Messiah,' but in such an artful way, that the opposite conclusion might be drawn by the reader. It is not for us to pretend to fathom motives, but it is very remarkable that the efforts first made to elevate Mendelssohn in this new walk were contemporary with those by which it was sought to depreciate Spohr.

Finally it may be noted that none of this seems to have disturbed Taylor's personal relationship with Spohr. On his visit to London in 1847 Spohr again stayed with Taylor at 3, Regent Sq. Kings Cross. However, Taylor's loss of position did mean that he was no longer able to promote Spohr's works so effectively as before, but it seems unlikely that this was really so important a factor in the decline of his popularity as Eaton believed.

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This article first appeared as Appendix A in Clive Brown's dissertation 'The Popularity and Influence of Spohr in England' (Oxford, 1980).

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