

LE BEETHOVEN FRANÇAIS - GEORGES ONSLOW 1784-1853

by John Lamb

In the French town of Clermont-Ferrand in the Auvergne, in the "Annus mirabilis" of 1784 when Louis Spohr and Ferdinand Ries saw the light of day, Georges Onslow was born. He was the eldest son of Edward Onslow who was the second son of the 3rd Baron Onslow, a British nobleman later to be further ennobled in 1801 to the rank of Earl. The Onslows, an ancient family, have distinguished themselves over the years in political circles. Edward was exiled to France by his father for some youthful indiscretion in 1781 and he married a French heiress and in 1784 our hero was born. As befitted a nobleman's son Georges was well educated and spent some time in England where he benefitted by lessons from emigré musicians in London such as J.B.Cramer and J.L.Dussek. Until his late teens he did not evince any marked love of music apart from manual dexterity at the piano but with membership of a circle of musical dilettantes in his own town and neighbourhood he began to show definite musical ability. He spent two years in Vienna and learned to play the 'cello well. He studied composition under Reicha in order to assist composition of three, none of which, unfortunately, achieved lengthy popularity.

It is mostly in the chamber music field that Onslow is remembered. In one sense his music resembles that of his more illustrious contemporary, Spohr, in so far as that he was responsible for no less than 34 string quartets and 35 string quintets as well as 10 piano trios. Most of his works were published and enjoyed popularity in his lifetime and the lyrical style and pleasant harmonies make listening to them entertaining even if his music does not plumb great depths of emotion. He always looked upon himself as an amateur but this is certainly not reflected in his professional approach to his compositions. This situation may have been the result of his social stance and financial circumstances which precluded him from "Going into Trade".

All his string quartets and quintets appeared as a collected edition in the 1830s published by Breitkopf and Härtel. One of the string quintets - No.15 - is a kind of programme music in which he portrays an unfortunate accident to himself in 1829 when he was struck in the face by a stray bullet during a boar-hunt and which rendered him partially deaf for the rest of his life.

He was a very industrious man and was the only French composer of his period to write so much chamber music. Like Haydn, who delighted to employ Croatian folk melodies in his string quartets, Onslow often used melodies of the Auvergne. The small number of works which are available especially those which include wind parts such as the Nonet, Op.77, modelled on Spohr's effort, the fine Wind Quintet in F, Op.81, and the Grand Septet, Op.79, show a fine grasp of harmony and counterpoint and an awareness of the optimum capabilities of the instruments concerned. He wrote several duet sonatas for 4 hands at one piano, one of which has been broadcast. His venture as a symphonist was short-lived and his three early symphonies are forgotten. A fine performance was given, however, in a recent broadcast of his fourth symphony, written for the Philharmonic Society of London to which body he was elected in 1832.

He was very popular with the Parisian musical world, and after the death of Cherubini in 1842 he was made head of the Institut de France - the leading musical authority of the day.

Although he wrote much piano music in his ensembles and accompanying roles, he only produced, like Spohr, one long piano sonata, an early work, Op.2,

and this is a very pleasing composition. It is quite noteworthy that Onslow, like Haydn before him, makes great use of the Variation form especially in his slow movements and in one of his quartets there is a splendid set of variations on "God, save the King".

In conclusion, the writer believes after hearing a small number of diverse works which have been broadcast and available on commercial records that Georges Onslow, who earned the soubriquet of 'Le Beethoven français' is very much overdue for a revival.