

THE LETTERS OF A LEIPZIG CANTOR

by Christopher Tutt

A fascinating insight into Spohr and the musical life of his time is to be found in the English edition of the selected letters of Moritz Hauptmann. Hauptmann, who lived from 1792 to 1868, was a pupil of Spohr, then joined him as a colleague in Kassel from 1822 to 1842 and for the rest of his life was Cantor of the Thomasschule in Leipzig, the post held by J.S.Bach in the previous century.

The fullest and frankest of these letters are the ones written to a friend called Franz Hauser, who was for many years Director of the Munich Conservatoire. In them he includes his opinions of various composers, explaining his likes and dislikes. For instance, he describes Beethoven's 9th Symphony as 'a wonderfully grand work - quite unique', but writing in 1832 he said about the late quartets:

We have frequently heard the last published Quartets of Beethoven at the weekly Quartet meetings, organised by Wiele and Hasemann. They jarred on me more than I can tell you, not the first time, but the oftener I heard them. That objectless rambling about is so painfully depressing, that it is hard to get on at all without a release by Mozart or Haydn directly afterwards: 'In seiner Ordnung schafft der Herr.' Freedom appears only within the sphere of limitation. I could say more on that subject, but it is clear to my mind that Art has lost nothing by Beethoven's death.

In the same letter he refers to Spohr's 4th Symphony:

Spohr is now writing a Symphony, suggested by Pfeiffer's poem, 'The Consecration of Sound'. The poem opens with a description of the origin of the phenomena of sound, leading up to the various musical episodes incidental to life; The Cradle Song, the Serenade (!), the Dance, the War Cry, the Battle, the song of Victory, at last the Dirge. No Kyrie or Gloria of course; that's out of date with the moderns! When Spohr first told me, that he intended to write a Symphony on this subject, I stated many of my objections to it in a written article; indeed, there is nothing rational to be said in its favour. However, the work is all but finished. I entirely commend Spohr for refusing to be diverted from his purpose by merely theoretical considerations, which are not in harmony with his creative instinct; but his loyalty to this subject springs from a morbid feeling, - the theme is radically unmusical. It is questionable whether he was attracted by any vital interest in it; he wanted some spur, some incitement to compose; the old spontaneity begins to fail him. If music has to be forced in this way, what is Art but a milch cow?

Again in 1835 he repeats his dislike of the idea of a programme symphony, while admitting its merits as a piece of music:

Spohr's change of style since he wrote 'Die Weihe der Töne' is noticeable; time was, when he rejected external, objective motives, and now he approves of and adopts them with equal ardour. The abiding test of an artist will ever be the unconscious, and as it were, instinctive feeling; and Spohr's

instinct is so unerring, that it works on spontaneously, heedless of the critics and their fine-spun reasons. Did you hear the Symphony? How do you like it? Putting the man out of the question, I am dead opposed to the genre. A work of art should be its own key of interpretation, explaining itself by a medium adapted to that purpose; notes, not words, should explain the secrets of a Symphony.

Hauptmann was even less happy about Spohr's next two programme symphonies, Nos. 6 and 7, and in 1841 we find him telling Hauser:

Spohr has completed another Symphony, which he calls 'Irdisches und Göttliches im Menschenleben'. What does it amount to? "Interesting harmonic progressions," of course. There are two orchestras, and they are so arranged, that one is for solo instruments, and the other for the orchestral Tutti, but the simple stringed instruments sound very meagre, when contrasted with the wind, and the combination is, to my mind, very ineffective. As a rule, I care little for sextets, septets, octets, and nonets, for the strings play too poor a part in them; give me a quartet, a quintet, or an orchestra! The first movement of this Symphony describes the unimpassioned days of childhood - the second, the age of passion - the third, something of the same sort - the fourth, a kind of purification. I can't endure such subjects - the outcome of laborious thought, rather than of genuine feeling. It has no vitality, no special meaning. People listen to it, as they would to anything else. After all, that is the best of the matter, and we need think no further about it, unless it is directly prejudicial to Spohr's music, when he is in the humour to give us something characteristic. For childhood, and the heavenly purification, or the return of calm to the mind, are not in his line; both subjects are clouded by those inevitable chromatic passages in the middle parts, and the affectation of naïvete and piety are equally unpalatable . . .

After moving to Leipzig Hauptmann kept up a regular correspondence with Spohr in which, quite understandably, he tells his old teacher and colleague about favourable receptions for his works. He also kept him informed about new works being performed in Leipzig. He speaks of his interest in the latest works of Schumann and in Schubert's Great C major Symphony. Hauptmann also finds something to admire in some of the works of Berlioz in spite of what he considered their eccentricities, though he was much less charitable about Wagner. In 1855 he wrote to Spohr about another performance of his 4th Symphony:

Your 'Weihe der Töne' was performed at our last Concert. My delight in that fine work is an old story; it was enhanced the other day, when I saw the great effect produced by it upon a very crowded audience. After all the torturing I have endured at the hands of so many modern composers, your music is in very truth a 'Consecration of Sound' - rest after great restlessness; we could not have wound up our Concerts better.

In a letter to a Herr Hille in 1855 he gives a balanced and at the same time warmly appreciative view of Spohr:

I am so glad you are fond of our dear old Spohr. I don't call him old, because he is over 70 (for really he does not look it), but because he has always been just the same, and will be, as long as he lives. Not that I care much for his 'Irdisches und Göttliches'. It is a weakling, born out of due time, and not to be compared with 'Die Weihe der Töne' . . . Objectivity indeed is not his strong point. I love him best in his purely

lyrical moments, when he lets himself go, and does attempt to produce anything except his own soul. Of course a decided character will express itself everywhere, and therefore you ought not to hear too many works of his, one after the other; a single work that lasts three hours - yes; but three hours of Spohr miscellanea - no thank you! (There are very few indeed who could stand that test.) His compositions have a very definite status in the musical world. Much of his harmony has become common property - and people use it, without so much knowing it is Spohr's. Even Schumann in his later period, in 'Paradise and The Peri', for instance, acts Spohr now and then, to the mutual satisfaction of himself and his audience.

Hauptmann evidently thought that Spohr was at his best in the earlier part of his career and in this letter written to Spohr himself in 1859 he recalls the impact made on him by some of the early works:

Many happy returns of the day to you! That is the wish of all our hearts.

It has been my privilege to spend many happy days in your neighbourhood - a year in Gotha, six months in Vienna, twenty years in Cassel - but I dare say you yourself scarcely remember the music which made me love even before that time - to wit, your first volume of songs, and an orchestral Overture in C minor. Franz and I got this last performed at a Cafe. I remember it as if it had happened yesterday. It was beautiful summer weather - I was only seventeen - no criticism stood in my way - and the inevitable desire to know how things are done, which must come later on, troubled me not. The music went straight to my heart, so that for days I walked about in a dream, thinking of nothing else. As for my architectural studies, they went to the dogs altogether; in fact, it was this Overture that made me a musician instead of a builder. After that, Hermstedt came to Dresden; he used to play your glorious clarinet music beautifully in those days. He was a friend of ours, and a constant visitor at our house, and he it was who insisted that I should be sent to you at Gotha.

Writing to Hauser in 1866 he recalls his last meeting with Spohr at Alexanderbad:

How we used to enjoy meeting Spohr there! He was failing a good deal, that last summer of 1859 - but more sympathetic than would have appeared to an outsider, as he sat silent at our table, out in the open air, leaning his chin upon his stick. He would put in a word sometimes, when no one noticed that he was taking any part in the conversation. He was always most good-natured about going wherever he was asked, when many another great man would have declined.

To me, Spohr's whole personality is a very pleasant remembrance. From the first years of our acquaintance, and even before that, he was my musical divinity; only by degrees, did other stars arise in my heaven. My reverence for him continued up to the very last. In his style and character as an artist, he is thoroughly genuine, never imposing on other people, never exalting himself above himself, always true to his own instincts. There are few like him.