

‘JESSONDA’ IN LONDON

by Celia Skrine

‘The greatest work of the greatest dramatic composer now living’: Spohr’s *Jessonda* in London, 1840 and 1841.

MUSICAL life in London in the 1840s was almost as rich and varied as it is now; the contemporary journal *Musical World* tells us that in 1841 there were the Philharmonic, the Ancient and the Exeter Hall concerts on the one hand and the English, German and Italian operas on the other, plus “countless ‘soirees’, ‘matinees’, ‘selections’, ‘recitals’, ‘morning performances’ commencing after noon and ‘evening concerts’ concluding long past midnight.”¹

Some of these were well established; the German opera, however, represented a relatively new departure, for though it had long been considered indispensable for any self-respecting capital city to have a resident Italian opera company, German ones were virtually unknown. The German repertoire was of course much less extensive and more recent than the Italian. The first German opera season in London was provided by a visiting company in 1832 but it did not become an annual event.

In 1840 a visiting German troupe again came to London; called simply the German Opera Company, it was directed by a Herr Schumann and consisted mainly of the Mainz opera company, with soloists from other parts of Germany, including some of the finest singers of the day. One of the operas it performed was Spohr’s *Jessonda*.

This was the first performance of *Jessonda* in England; it had been composed in 1822 and first performed in Germany the following year². *The Musical World*, June 1840, carries a long article on it; firstly an account of the plot, translated from a German periodical and “entering into details of the work with a minuteness thoroughly characteristic of the country from which it emanated”, then a characteristically carping review of the German Opera Company’s performance.

“The performance of this opera [...] does no manner of justice to the beauties with which Spohr has crowded its pages. This remark we apply to the general effect; since there are many individual points of striking excellence. The new prima donna, Mme Stöckl-Heinefetter, to whom was cast the part of Jessonda, seemed to be highly successful; – that is, she provoked a large amount of applause in the course of the opera, and was compelled to re-appear at its conclusion – still we confess to a strong feeling of disappointment. In the matter of acting and deportment, she was scarcely that Jessonda whose personal identity may be so strongly anticipated from a perusal of the story, neither is her style of singing [...] adapted to the peculiar traits of Spohr’s music [...] Her manner was too lofty and commanding – it wanted feminine gentleness; and her singing was so constantly in excess of force, as to amount to a total misconception as to the character of the music [...] This we take to be the principal defect in Mme Heinefetter’s *Jessonda*, since in several instances [...] she displayed an abundance of musical feeling as well as dramatic tact in its utterance [...] The *Tristan d’Acunha* of Herr Poeck was by far the finest performance of the evening, and altogether one of the most beautiful dramatic displays we have seen [...] It was a worthy performance of the fine part which the poet and composer have unitedly produced. Mme Schumann was as charming as ever, in *Amazili*, and Herr Schmeder was more entirely successful than usual as *Nadori*. The chorus was fairly effective, but [...] the band never

played so ill since the commencement of the season; – mistakes of all kinds, bad specimens of accompaniment, and a total lack of ensemble, characterised the doings of the orchestra throughout. It should be remembered that the well-going of the band contributes more than one half towards the success of Spohr's operatic music, and that half was, on this occasion, sacrificed by a style of playing which indicated either that no rehearsal had been thought necessary, or that it had been hurried over with negligence sufficient to neutralise its intended value."

The 1840 season of the German Opera Company also included performances of *Der Freischütz* (top favourite in England at the time), *Fidelio*, *Don Giovanni*, Kreutzer's *Nachtlager in Granada*, Gluck's *Iphigenia* and Spohr's *Faust*, of which a long review appears in *The Musical World*.³ The season was acclaimed as a great success and Herr Schumann was persuaded to return the following year.

Thus 1841 saw the return of the German Opera Company to play, not in the Prince's Theatre again, but in the much larger Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. One of the announcements in *The Times* reads as follows:

(15 March 1841) Theatre Royal, Drury Lane: The German Opera.

This evening will be performed Spohr's opera of JESSONDA.

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| Jessonda | Mme Heinefetter |
| Amazili | Mme Schumann |
| Dandau | Herr Staudigl |
| Tristan D'Cunha | Herr Mellinger |

A powerful chorus under the direction of Herr Baerwolf.

The Orchestra, on a Grand Scale, directed by Herr Ganz.

Stalls 10s.6d., Dress Boxes 7s., Upper Box Stalls 5s., Pit 5s., Gallery 3s.

The first 1841 performance of *Jessonda* was given on 18 March and was reviewed the next day in *The Times* and the *Morning Chronicle*; both papers tended to be effusive, in contrast to the rather acerbic *Musical World*. The *Morning Chronicle* regretted that this "beautiful piece" did not attract a larger audience, especially as "we had every reason to anticipate a still finer performance than that of last season, and the anticipation was fully realised. Of the opera itself it is unnecessary to speak; it is the greatest work of the greatest dramatic composer now living."⁴ The writer goes on to praise the four main singers and concludes "The orchestra and the chorus were superb and the *mise en scene* excellent in every respect. The entertainment, in short, was one which ought to have filled the house to the ceiling."

The Times gives a more graphic description, which is worth quoting at length.

"Mme Stöckl-Heinefetter made the most brilliant display both of singing and acting, of vocal power and impassioned declamation. The scene in the last act, where she is awaiting the death that has been prepared for her [...] called forth the full power of Mme Stöckl-Heinefetter. At the opening of the scene she threw herself on the ground and in a low desponding tone sang the lines beginning 'Ich hatt' entsagt des Erden freden [sic]', She then raised herself at the reminiscence of her lover, and with a sudden gleam of joy entered on the words

'Da glänzt am Himmel
Ein Strahl der Morgenröthe'.

The sudden transition to despair as she says that a 'great burden' is weighing her down, the attitude that expressed the change, as she turned away from the audience and stood petrified at the dread of her own imaginings, with the fall of the voice that accompanied the movement, electrified the house."

Herr Mellinger as Tristan and Herr Sesselmann as the chief Brahmin receive more qualified praise. Then, “but none of the vocalists gave greater satisfaction than Mme Schumann, who plays Amazili, and sang with the most unaffected feeling, with real intelligence, and with that amiability of manner which imparts charm to all the characters she undertakes, whether serious or comic.” One cannot help wishing that these ladies’ performances had been captured on gramophone recordings, even of the most primitive kind!

The question of the quality of performance is a difficult one. The leading singers of the day were no doubt excellent, but reports of the standard of the orchestra and chorus vary greatly. The orchestra was probably not particularly good; its nucleus was the Mainz theatre band, which is known to have been mediocre, run on a shoestring and convened afresh for each new season⁵. Among the second violins was a boy of sixteen, talented and enthusiastic but, by his own admission, not a highly competent violinist; this was Peter Cornelius, who was later to compose the excellent comic opera *Der Barbier von Bagdad* (first performance 1858). The orchestra was augmented by a number of English players hired in London. The chorus seems to have sung efficiently and with gusto, though its appearance and stage presence appealed to some more than others. *The Times*, reviewing the opening night (*Der Freischütz* on 15 March 1841), reported “The chorus [...] was magnificent: an army of stout Germans each singing and acting as if the fate of the opera depended on himself alone, each man making a part and forming a humiliating contrast to our phlegmatic compatriots.” But the *Weekly Dispatch* a few days later expressed itself glad that the larger Drury Lane theatre was being used because “the huge, misshapen and clumsy figures of North Germans [...] can be tolerated only at a distance. Added to this they are awkward, clownish and rustic in their manners; they overact everything [...]” However, it does not criticise their singing.

Jessonda was probably given several performances during the company’s season in London, which lasted from March until July and included about one hundred performances altogether; it had already been given twice by the middle of May, as Peter Cornelius reports in a letter of 21 May⁶. The company then travelled to Manchester for a highly successful week, though this did not include a performance of *Jessonda*; they also visited Liverpool.

Despite their successes, however, they were in serious financial trouble. Several reasons for this are suggested. The Drury Lane Theatre was really too large and expensive, and the company was large; contemporary reports vary, but there must have been close on a hundred performers and possibly more. The soloists were expensive; Cornelius tells us that Mme Heinefetter received £20 and Staudigl and Haitzinger £16 each per night⁷, and fees of up to £90 a night were rumoured in the *Manchester Guardian* in July, though the *Manchester and Salford Advertiser* said this was an exaggeration, “£60 being nearer the mark.”⁸ Attendances dropped as the summer went on, due partly to the exodus of the culture-loving element of the population to retreats, partly to the rival interest of a Parliamentary election, and perhaps also to the prices of the tickets (quoted above), which the *Weekly Dispatch* considered “impudently high”. Whatever the reasons, what had begun with high hopes and great ambitions ended in disappointment and debt, and the company did not return to London.

Yet in many ways the visit must be counted a considerable success. Cornelius wrote home on 16 July:

“On Wednesday 7 July we played in London for the last time, and the public gave us a spectacular send-off; the stage was strewn with bouquets and bunches of flowers, and thunderous applause rang out from all parts of the crowded house.”⁹

The English public had been given ample opportunity to hear several German operas, some for the first time; and the music shops backed up the enterprise by providing prose translations of

the libretti so that even those who knew no German should not be at a disadvantage. Weber's *Der Freischütz* was the most popular of all, followed by *Fidelio*. Operas by Gluck and Mozart were also popular, as were, to a lesser extent, the other operas by Weber, *Euryanthe* and *Oberon*. The least successful opera of the 1841 season was Auber's *Masaniello* or *La Muette de Portici* which, in the opinion of *The Times*, reflected less credit on the management than anything else performed during either season:

“the spectacle was one of an excellent company placed in a situation where their talents were completely thrown away [...] Surely the point of a German company is to let the English hear German opera in German.”¹⁰

This was exactly what the German Opera Company did with *Jessonda*, and its reception in London showed how open-minded and appreciative English audiences could be.

Notes

1. *Musical World*, 8.4.1841.
2. The occasion was the birthday of Spohr's new employer, the Elector of Hesse in Kassel. The opera was an immediate success.
3. *Musical World*, 25.5.1840.
4. By this date Beethoven, Weber, Schubert and Bellini were dead, and Wagner's and Verdi's great works were yet to be written. Rossini was still alive, though he had stopped composing operas some ten years previously. Donizetti and Schumann were still alive.
5. See Günter Wagner, “Friedrich Lux (1820-1895): ein vergessener thüringisch-rheinischer Musiker” in *Florilegium Musicologicum: Festschrift H. Federhofer zum 75. Geburtstag*, pp.447-448.
6. Peter Cornelius, *Literarische Werke*, 4 vols., (Leipzig 1905-06), I, pp.17-18.
7. *Ibid*, p.18.
8. *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 24.7.1841.
9. Cornelius, op. cit., p.24 (my translation)
10. *The Times*, 25.3.1841.