

COMMENTS ON SOME NEW SPOHR RECORDINGS

By Paul Katow

Quartets

The Spohr Quartets series started by Marco Polo has received rather positive comments in the last Spohr Newsletters. Personally, I am not so enthusiastic about the New Budapest Quartet's interpretations. To my feeling, its stiff and cautious playing in Volumes One and Two (Quartets Op.84, No.1, 2 and 3, and Op.93) shows that it was not familiar at all with Spohr's style when the recording sessions started — an understandable shortcoming of course, since Spohr's Quartets have been neglected for so many years. I feel especially Volume One (Op.84, No.1 and 2) to be played too close to the notes to be a real interpretation. Fortunately, matters improve in Volumes Three to Five because, meanwhile, the New Budapest Quartet has very much "warmed up" in its playing. Volume Five, with the important Quartets Op.29, No.1 and 2, shows that the Hungarian ensemble has reached a higher level of quality.

Of course, real Spohr enthusiasts will buy the whole series, but if I had to recommend one of these CDs to a quartet collector unfamiliar with Spohr's music, I would certainly choose Volume Five. The recordings convey such an acoustic presence that sometimes they seem too close to the listener's ears. A special mention must be given to the really outstanding, objective and very informative booklet texts by Clive Brown, Keith Warsop and Chris Tutt.

"Jessonda"

After his 1985 live recording for the Austrian Radio (ORF) with Cheryl Studer and Roland Herrmann in the main roles, Gerd Albrecht has now recorded Spohr's most successful opera for a second time on a two-CD set issued by Orfeo. It has many positive features which make it a recommendable issue, yet I would like to point out some reservations. In the main roles, Julia Varady and her husband, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau give us very convincing performances, but Frau Varady's usual problems with German pronunciation are a little bit disturbing (you need to read the text if you want to understand what she is singing) and Fischer-Dieskau's voice is merely a pale shadow of itself; Roland Herrmann's voice in Albrecht's ORF recording is more pleasant to listen to. Thomas Moser as Nadori (already in this part in the ORF live recording) and Kurt Moll as Dandau are excellent, whereas Renate Behle is good but not so strongly profiled. More fire and sparkle from Herr Albrecht's side would have been welcome here and there (for instance in the Overture which he had already recorded for Schwann), but the Hamburg State Opera Chorus and the Hamburg State Philharmonic Orchestra are quite good. The sound quality is excellent; some slight background noises here and there seem to indicate that the recording is a mixture from sessions with and without an audience.

I have reservations about the booklet text by Jürgen Schläder who tries to prove that Eduard Gehe's libretto is not so good as Lemierre's original play, but fails to say anything about the outstanding stylistic features of Spohr's music which anticipates Wagner's in many points. After all, in an opera and especially in the case of *Jessonda*, listeners care more for the music than for the libretto. Anyway, I am sure that the issue will convert many new (opera) friends to Spohr's music. The presence of a world-famous name like Fischer-Dieskau will certainly attract many CD collectors and in this sense I think that this production can only enhance Spohr's reputation.