

UNCOLLECTED TOVEY – AN UNLIKELY SOURCE

by Keith Warsop

IN the articles by Sir Donald Tovey collected in his *Essays in Musical Analysis* and in various entries by him in *Cobbett's Cyclopaedia of Chamber Music* his attitude to Spohr is rather patronising. This attitude stems partly from the influence of Spohr's recorded views on Tovey's hero, Beethoven, and partly from Tovey's own feeling of superiority based on his adherence to the aesthetic views of Brahms and Joachim.

So Spohr becomes his favourite whipping boy as in his comment on Spohr's sonata form "there is only one", although there are times when even Tovey has to admit sheer mastery – for instance in the violin duos.

However, that Tovey could be generous to Spohr when he was not trying to stun his readers with his own brilliance and mastery of paradox and epigram is shown in an article brought to our attention which appeared in the *Country Life* magazine for September 28, 1967.

In this issue a regular column, *The Musical Scene* by Stewart Deas (a Scottish conductor who died in 1985 at the age of 81), concentrates on Spohr, inspired by a recent broadcast of the Octet, Op.32. Mr. Deas says that the broadcast, by the Prometheus Ensemble, sent him to his shelf of miniature scores for "a very special copy" of the music. He continues: "It is a very special copy because it originally belonged to Sir Donald Francis Tovey who passed it on to me in 1930. It was not that he was finished with Spohr, but that his friend, the pianist Paul Wittgenstein [the one-armed pianist who commissioned a number of works for Left Hand Piano and Orchestra], a Spohr enthusiast, had shortly before presented him with a new copy of the collected chamber works, and he thought he could suitably dispose of his old copy by passing it on to me."

The article continues:

"The copy has a number of pencilled notes, and all misprints, of which there are many, have been carefully corrected. Underneath the second half of the "[Harmonious] Blacksmith" theme, Tovey has written "The Compleat Garbler", for it is one of the odd things about Spohr's use of the theme that he has left out part of it.

"Over the movement as a whole, Tovey has written: 'If Spohr must write fresh variations on this theme why should he get the theme all wrong? It's very funny. Still, this is a very jolly movement.' Spohr makes considerable demands on the players in these variations, particularly the horns (Alan Civil and Barry Tuckwell on the broadcast occasion, and thereby impeccable) and the violin (Max Salpeter, taking all in his stride) but the 'mistakes' in the theme are difficult to explain unless it was simply a case of faulty recollection. The first movement Tovey pronounced excellent, and of the Menuetto he writes: 'There's real genius and romance in this movement.'

At the end of the work he has scribbled: 'One can't help sharing in Chopin's youthful admiration for this work. It is capital fun; and very curious.' The reference to Chopin is typical of Tovey's retentive and cross-referring memory for it comes from a single sentence in one of Chopin's letters dated Warsaw October 3, 1829: 'Yesterday they played, among other things, Spohr's Octet; lovely, exquisite'."