

# SPOHR AND HIS SOCIETIES

## A brief survey to mark 25 years of the Spohr Society of Great Britain

by Keith Warsop

AFTER Spohr's death on 22 October, 1859, his second wife, Marianne, not only inherited many materials relating to the composer's life and works but she also preserved his music room as a shrine. In fact her hero worship of the master reached such heights that she relegated a bust of Mozart which had graced the music room to the floor and replaced it with a bust of Spohr himself! So, when Marianne died in 1892 the "Spohr Haus" with its associated materials was in fact if not in title already a "Spohr Museum". But this state of affairs did not continue because, while some of the heirs would have been happy with the *status quo*, others wanted the estate settling up so that they could take possession of their part of the inheritance.

As a result, Spohr's house was sold and demolished in 1893 so the site could be developed but before this happened the heirs handed over to the city of Kassel a considerable number of relics such as autograph manuscripts, diaries, letters, instruments, pictures, furniture, programmes, journals, first editions and so on. The bulk of this material was mainly on loan although some was a gift to the city and there was an understanding that a "Spohr Museum for all time" should be established "in suitable rooms" in the city and that this should be generally accessible to the public and to scholars.

Although there was no shortage of space at that time nothing was done until in 1905 some of the heirs demanded the return of the property which had been on loan but in order to hinder any action of this sort the city authorities made a formal written assertion of their claim to its ownership against that of the heirs. At the same time the city tardily opened a Spohr Memorial room in the attic of the Murhardsche Bibliothek.

These were sad years for Spohr's reputation, however; hopes that a re-evaluation upwards would be encouraged by the 1884 centenary of his birth did not survive the 1890s and after the turn of the century he slipped gradually from the sight of the music world at large. So it was that on 12 October, 1908, a Spohr-Gesellschaft was formed in Kassel, not just to promote the composer's music but also to form its own collection with a view to establishing a proper Spohr Museum. The times were not propitious for such a venture as the full-blown late Romantic style was at its height and made Spohr appear dated; in addition the reaction against the musical equivalent of Victorianism (Mendelssohn, Spohr and others of that time) was gathering pace. The benefits were that prices of things which reached the salerooms were not too expensive and the Society brought together a far more comprehensive collection of exhibition and archive items than that held by the city. Its secretary, Heinrich Stein, put this on display in his own private "Spohr-Konservatorium" and so we have to thank these early enthusiasts for making sure that much of Spohr's legacy came together in Kassel. During the Millennial celebrations of 1913 the city's collection was put on display in Oberneustadt town hall but after the First World War began, shortage of space led to the whole of this collection being stored in the attic of the Murhardsche Bibliothek.

In 1920 the city proposed that the Society should take over the collection in the possession of the authorities and together with the items in the "Spohr-Konservatorium" make it available to the public as a Spohr-Museum. This was opened on May 1, 1921, in No.17 Friedrichsstrasse but lasted only until April, 1922, when the death of Herr Stein meant that this private house was required for use by the family and had to be cleared. The city dealt with this situation by transferring the whole Spohr-Museum to rooms in the former royal palace on the Friedrichsplatz. When the inflationary period ended, however, the city moved its part of the display back to the Murhardsche Bibliothek in order to save money and the rented rooms at the palace were given up. The city also urged the Society to place its collection in the same library. After months of negotiation a small part of the furniture and some instruments went on display in the porter's lodge and the artists' room of the library. Protests from the Society and the Spohr descendants led to more displays being set up in the building but arguments for a worthy place for a Spohr Museum went on in vain until February, 1933.

At this stage Hitler's rise to power in Germany damaged the Society severely — some of its leading members were Jews and therefore a target of the regime. In the summer of 1933 the Society was dissolved because two of its committee members "of the Mosaic faith" had substantially funded its work. All autographs, first editions, pictures, sculptures, furniture and other items belonging to the Society were confiscated. On May 14, 1934, the Nazi mayor of Kassel, Dr. Gustav Lahmeyer, ordered the dispersal and partial destruction of the museum and archive stock. The shameful behaviour of those in authority remains on record through the survival of collections of state administrative documents.

A further blow to Spohr's legacy came on the night of 22 October, 1943, (84 years to the day after the composer's death!) when the RAF raided Kassel under the policy of "saturation bombing" and left the city centre a heap of blazing ruins. The autograph scores of most of Spohr's operas (*Faust* and *Jessonda* among them) which were stored in the Opera House were destroyed as was the building itself. Miraculously, the statue of Spohr outside the Opera House survived. As Dorothy Moulton Mayer (Lady Mayer) wrote after an immediate post-war visit to Kassel before rebuilding

began: "Spohr's monument still stands untouched by the devastation from the skies. His tall figure, baton in hand and violin under his arm, rises up opposite the ruined palace of his patron and tormentor — a symbol of the immortal art which in his life he so nobly served."<sup>1</sup>

With reconstruction under way, others were inspired to come forward to serve Spohr nobly too. Scholars whose work dated back to the pre-Nazi period such as Friedrich Otto Leinert, Eugen Schmitz, Franz Uhlendorff and Folker Göthel joined with younger men such as the publicist Herfried Homburg in re-founding the newly-named Louis Spohr Gesellschaft in 1954 around the time when the Kassel-based publishing house of Bärenreiter was issuing an edition of selected works of Spohr, the *Ausgewählte Werke*, in collaboration with the cities of Braunschweig (Spohr's birthplace) and Kassel.<sup>2</sup> Herr Homburg, in particular, proved a tireless worker as secretary of the Society and in autumn, 1959, was able to receive back from the city library autographs, first editions and pictures that had escaped the bombing though other items which were saved from the Nazi action still remain in the City of Kassel Music Academy even though the original Spohr-Gesellschaft imprint is clearly recognisable. Herr Homburg, backed by the urging of the Spohr descendants, was also able to persuade the city to establish a research room in the Murhardsche Bibliothek and the Louis Spohr-Gedenk- und Forschungsstätte was opened in October, 1967, after a move inside the library to more spacious surroundings where the Society's collection was made available for scholars and interested members of the public. In 1963 the LSG began a scholarly edition of selected works (*Neue Auswahl der Werke*) with the Seventh Violin Concerto<sup>3</sup>, then in 1968 *Louis Spohr — Bilder und Dokumente seiner Zeit* by Herr Homburg was published in Kassel, a seminal Spohr source book which also contains one of the finest of all essays on Spohr's artistic personality; one which is still awaiting a deserved publication in English translation.

By 1969, two English Spohr enthusiasts, Maurice F. Powell and Keith Warsop, were in contact with Herr Homburg and through this common link came together to decide that the time was right to form a British society devoted to Spohr. On 1 October, 1969, they founded the Spohr Society of Great Britain; that month's *Musical Times* carried a letter from Maurice Powell announcing the formation of the Society and inviting membership. For the record, this is what appeared (No.1,519, Vol.110, Page 935):

#### **SPOHR SOCIETY**

As a result of the increased interest in the composer Louis Spohr, I am forming a British branch of the Spohr Society of Kassel, Germany.

I should like to hear from any of your readers interested in such a society.

MAURICE F. POWELL,  
21 Ripon Gardens,  
Cranbrook, Ilford, Essex.

Within weeks some 30 performers, scholars and amateur enthusiasts had signed up and the SSGB was in business. The next major move came in 1970 when Maurice Powell visited Kassel for the general meeting of the LSG and was elected to its ruling body, the Presidium, with the SSGB being adopted as the British branch of the now renamed Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft. In October 1971 the city of Braunschweig opened rooms in Spohr's birth house as a museum dedicated to the composer and Messrs Powell and Warsop represented the SSGB at the ceremony which was followed by a concert in Schloß Richmond, one of the most beautiful 18th century palaces in the city. Lady Mayer, wife of the musical philanthropist Sir Robert Mayer, agreed to become president of the SSGB and at this time Musica Rara and other publishers began slowly to reissue Spohr's music in new editions<sup>4</sup>; recordings also began to appear and the Society was involved in one of the Notturmo sponsored by Lady Mayer and another of the Second Clarinet Concerto sponsored by the clarinettist John Denman (still a member of the SSGB)<sup>5</sup>; radio broadcasts too helped with this new stage of the Spohr revival. Later in the 1970s a whole floor in Kassel's impressive Schloß Bellevue, Schöne Aussicht 2, was allocated for the Louis Spohr-Gedenk- und Forschungsstätte.

A key member of the SSGB in the 1970s was Denis Bowyer, now a honorary life member, who was indefatigable as membership secretary in issuing Newsletters and Journals and in general keeping the Spohr flame burning at a time when the two founders, mainly because of career developments, were forced to take a back seat for some years. His successor, Chris Tutt, has proved equally dedicated. The SSGB received its greatest honour in 1984 when Maurice Powell was nominated president of the ILSG, a post he held for five years. He was succeeded as chairman of the British Society by Keith Warsop. All the time the SSGB was gathering strength through the influx of new adherents to the cause of Spohr. Two of especial importance were Clive Brown and Malcolm Latchem. The former is now established as the world's leading Spohr scholar whose 1984 book *Louis Spohr: A Critical Biography*, has become the definitive guide to the composer; whose ten-volume edition of selected works for Garland Publishing (1988-90) has greatly enlarged availability of the music; and whose revival of *Faust* and *Jessonda* (1984 and 1980 respectively) were major factors in the new respect Spohr is gaining from the critical establishment. Malcolm Latchem's role as violinist and business manager of the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields Chamber Ensemble has been invaluable in enabling Spohr to be

presented to the public in concerts, broadcasts and on record in performances of the highest possible artistic quality.

The approach to the Spohr bicentenary in 1984 generated new interest in the composer and since then the growth of publications and recordings has reached levels beyond the wildest hopes of the two founders back in 1969. Even live performances, a notably conservative area, have boomed once one looks below the glamorous level of the big-name international circuit. Only on the BBC has there been a relapse over the past couple of years though this is a field notoriously at the mercy of the taste of music controllers and producers. Even here, there have been recent surprises such as a broadcast of *Faust* with Fischer-Dieskau in the title role (sadly, Spohr's greatest champion at the BBC, the producer Anthony Friese-Greene, died recently a few years after retiring).

The last few years have seen the launch of major recording projects devoted to complete cycles of many of Spohr's compositions; symphonies, violin concertos, clarinet concertos, double-quartets, string quintets and quartets, piano trios, violin duets and a capella works as well as nearly all the works involving the harp. In these areas the SSSGB has worked closely with record companies which have strong British outlets such as Hyperion, Marco Polo, Naxos and CRD while the ILSG has an equally strong relationship with German labels such as CPO and Orfeo. Publishers too are still expanding into the Spohr market. The German firm Wollenweber have recently issued material for some of the string chamber music including the sextet and the British firm SJ Music of Cambridge are tackling the string quintets; even as we write they have published study scores of Op.33, No.2 and Op.91. We close with perhaps the most welcome news of all — Spohr's music is costing considerably less; SJ Music charge only £12 for sets of parts for each of these quintets and the scores are just £4.50 each. On record, the four clarinet concertos are appearing on the "super-budget" label Naxos at around £5 per CD.

**The author wishes to express his thanks for the friendly co-operation of Chris Tutt in translating German source material.**

#### Footnotes

- 1 Mayer. *The Forgotten Master* (London, 1959) page 192.
- 2 Comprising Symphony No.3; Clarinet Concerto No.1; Violin Concerto in A major, WoO.12; Nonet; Octet; Piano and Wind Quintet; Double-Quartet No.1; String Quartets Opp.15/1 & 2; String Quartet Op.29/1; Piano Trio No.4; Sonata in C minor for violin & harp, WoO.23; Harp Fantasie in C minor, Op.36; Six Songs, Op.25; Six Songs, Op.103.
- 3 Published to date: Violin Concerto No.7; Clarinet Concerto No.4; Three String Quartets, Opp.58/1; 74/2 & 3. Currently at the printers: Clarinet Concerto No.2; Concertante No.1, Op.48. Nearing completion: Selected Overtures.
- 4 Musica Rara publications comprise: Octet; Septet; Piano & Wind Quintet; Six Songs, Op.103; Alruna Variations; Potpourri on Themes of Winter, Op.80.
- 5 Notturmo on Oryx Romantic 1830 (wind section of The Little Orchestra of London conducted by Leslie Jones) coupled with Hummel's Wind Octet-Partita in E flat major. Clarinet Concerto on Oryx Romantic 1828 (John Denman, clarinet; The Sadler's Wells Opera Orchestra conducted by Hazel Vivienne) coupled with Carl Stamitz's Clarinet Concerto No.3 in B flat major.