

THE BERLIN PREMIÈRE OF 'FAUST'

Zelter describes the event in a letter to Goethe of 15 November 1829

by Peter Skrine

THE Berlin première of Spohr's opera *Faust* took place on 14 November 1829, in the absence of the composer, who had not been invited. The next day, on Sunday 15 November, Carl Friedrich Zelter, the director of the Berlin Singakademie, wrote a letter to his old friend Goethe describing the performance he had just witnessed. This letter is a valuable document in a number of ways. In the first place it provides an informed comment on Spohr's opera by a distinguished and knowledgeable musician who was well aware of the development of contemporary music in Germany. But Zelter was also one of Goethe's closest friends — and one of the very few people to be allowed to address him by the familiar pronoun 'Du'. And Goethe was of course the creator of *Faust*, and had spent almost his entire lifetime brooding on the great subject he had made his own. Thus, in this letter, we overhear the musician speaking to Germany's greatest living poet about a work by Spohr which impinged on their own closest interests.

Zelter's evocative and critical gifts are as remarkable as his tact. A mild and amusing irony serves just as well as flattery, and Goethe is spared a comparison between his own Faust drama and the opera's libretto by Joseph Carl Bernard, a long-since forgotten Viennese writer. Instead Zelter neatly distinguishes between the melodramatic nonsense of the action and the high quality of the music, thus implying between Spohr and Goethe as true artists an affinity a good deal closer than the one, so much more (or less?) obvious and tempting, between the two treatments of the Faust story.

Zelter begins his letter — and the task was a potentially awkward one! — by setting a relaxed tone by playing on the word 'faust', which means 'fortunate' or 'happy' in Latin. He then broaches the subject by deftly alluding to Spohr's attempts to establish a sound aesthetic base for German opera: the 'sanhedrin' to which he jokingly refers may well refer to the open letter to his fellow German composers which Spohr had published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in July 1823, and in which he enunciated his theory that the plot, scenery and costumes of an opera should appeal to the mass of the public, while connoisseurs will appreciate the quality of the opera's musical setting. Contemporary playbills bear out the justice of his view, and so evidently did the Berlin production of *Faust*, the first performance of which had taken place under Weber in Prague on 1 September 1816. A serious Romantic composer's relationship with the theatre was an uneasy one, and Spohr knew that it required compromise. Zelter knows this, too, as he makes clear when, with an ironic chuckle, he pinpoints the specious morality of Faust's thoughts and actions in the opera. Goethe had no reason to fear he might be upstaged.

In translation the text of his letter reads as follows:¹

That lovely word 'faustus', 'fauste', 'faust' has been given such portentous significance by you that it serves you right if you now have to experience its after-effects at your own peril. So let me tell you:

Yesterday evening for the first time in my life I watched and listened to *Faust*, the grand opera by J. C. Bernard and Spohr, from beginning to end.

If I am not mistaken, the composer convened a sanhedrin, or whatever it's called, some years ago to help him draw up and ratify with him some universally valid rules for grand opera and comic opera, such as can be clearly discerned in his grandest work — the one I've just mentioned. Whether they reached any conclusions I do not know, and have never asked.

Yesterday's performance of this ample, highly polished work deserved my fullest praise, and a full house was equally lavish with its applause. The orchestra, that supreme faculty of any opera, played like *one* man: the singers were as perfect as they could possibly be; the extras, machines, sets, witches, spirits, and other horrors were all given their due and were very well received. But first let me tell you about the libretto and its principal characters. Faust, a handsome and precocious young man, wants to dry off, but steps into the water at the deep end — he's a charming and amiable enthusiast especially when it comes to girls and young women, humane, well-intentioned, high-minded but — impecunious. In order to exercise his finer feelings, he decides to make his soul over to the Evil One. But he is a clever young man, too, so he sets out to trick the devil into doing good contrary to his nature and intentions. 'Mankind! be thou appeas'd,' he declares, 'On Hell itself I'll wreak thy vengeance! It will afford me perfect pleasure to defeat you with the weapons which your power offers me. To good works my will constrains them...', and so on. But poetry apart, you will surely allow me to express myself parabolically now and then, because first of all I need to set this sort of thing to my own kind of music. You must surely agree that it's all really very Christian, and suits the period in which it is set like a cloak and dagger. Harboured attitudes of this sort, our hero makes love to sweet little Rosie, whom he has already

slept with, and whose mother he has therefore conveyed to eternal rest. In fact he's already had enough of her, though he is far from worn out. All of which outrages the good burghers: they set upon him in order to hand him over to the law, but before their very eyes off he flies through the air together with fair Röschen. Which brings us to Act II:

A knight named Gulf has abducted the bride of another knight called Hugo, and carried her off to his castle. Enter Faust, who sets fire to the castle, flings Gulf into the blaze, rescues the young lady and returns her to her betrothed. A wedding follows. In gratitude — as is only right and proper — the happy couple request the rescuer to be their best man. The best man promptly seduces the bride on her wedding day under the very eye of her new husband. The latter turns nasty, so Faust stabs him to death in front of all the wedding guests, who can think of nothing more pressing than to drag the corpse away.

Mephisto is the most dim-witted devil there ever was. Clad in russet and made up to look like a redhot oven, he is strikingly incompetent, malevolent and disgusting, so that it's hard to understand why they all put up with him when he keeps popping up, causing offence and making no secret of his dastardly intentions.

Röschen is a real angel, unaffected, charming, happy, and loving; she loves and trusts with all her heart, but when she realises she has been deceived, she meekly drowns herself.

So much for the main characters. Faust, the bringer of happiness, who never notices that anything is wrong until it has got on top of him, is finally accorded the same honour as Elijah, only in reverse: he descends into a Hell, which, when seen at a distance, looks rather enticing. But Hell isn't at all sure what to do with such a ninny, so has him set to music and sent back up again on stage.

Let me now turn to the composer's contribution. He reveals himself to be a true artist, not just a mere musician and melodist. Everything is executed with the utmost artistry and attention to detail so as to surprise and satisfy the most attentive ear. The finest Brussels lace is coarse stuff by comparison. But it really is essential to have the libretto with one at a performance, because the words are set high or low, bright or dark, firm or loose, and so on, with the precision of a beehive. The role of Röschen is truly touching, and dear little Schätzel, who is a trim and lovable girl, plays her most attractively and with a voice as clear as a bell.

The performance is beyond praise as far as the composition and the orchestra are concerned, as I have said. Some gentlemen thought they detected defects here and there, but I couldn't hear any. That sort of person is like a parade-ground captain observing live action in which unforeseen accidents which have no place in the rulebook are bound to occur.

Zelter's letter conveys but does not overdo his admiration for Spohr. He refrains from musical technicalities, knowing that they would be lost on Goethe, who preferred Zelter's settings of his poems to those of Schubert. What he does convey to his friend in Weimar is the flavour of the piece and the feel of the performance. Knowing Goethe's long practical involvement with the theatre, he concentrates on the opera's theatrical effect, and focuses his attention on the presentation of the character of Mephistopheles. What Zelter wishes to convey to Goethe is that Spohr's evil is no match for Goethe's extraordinary creation: he is a cardboard figure, inconsistent and ineffectual, who only bears a faint resemblance to his immortal cousin. The singer who sang the role isn't even named though he is allowed to return from Hell and take his bow, a lifeless devil risen from the dead. Zelter also knows that Goethe, being Goethe, was much more likely to take an interest in the charming Röschen, who in Bernard's version of the story plays the part of Goethe's Gretchen. Nor is it the role that Zelter comments on: it is the singer, Fräulein von Schätzel, whose attractive voice and personality would have appealed as much to Goethe as they obviously did to Zelter; in a letter written some time later, in 1832, the last year of Goethe's life, he comes very near to telling his old friend that he loved this young soprano with more than an old man's affection. Goethe, author of the *Marienbad Elegy*, would have understood.

1. The text of Zelter's letter may be found in *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter*, edited by Max Hecker, 3 vols (Frankfurt/M: Insel, 1987), III, 241-43.

Spohr as Faust?; A footnote by Keith Warsop

In the light of Zelter's criticisms of Bernard's libretto, it may be helpful to note some of his source material for his plot. This is usefully summarised by Frank Harders-Wuthenow (translated by Susan Marie Praeder) in the booklet accompanying the CPO recording of the 1993 Bielefeld production of the 1852 version: "Bernard, who kept up with the Viennese theatre scene and had a thorough knowledge of contemporary literature, incorporated motifs from the Faust legend, Faust arrangements of the *Sturm und Drang* (above all Klinger's novel *Fausts Leben, Taten und Höllenfahrt*), Kleist's *Käthchen von Heilbronn* (premiered in Vienna in 1810), and Goethe's *Faust I* into his libretto. Bernard's inspiration for Kunigunde's abduction by the robber knight Gulf and her liberation came from the genre of the liberation opera. On the whole Bernard's *Faust* owed more to chivalric and gothic romanticism than to the classical treatment of the material such as he knew it from Goethe's human drama."

As it is generally agreed that the plot of Bernard's *Faust* is a mess, one might wonder how Spohr came to accept it.

John Warrack, in his review of the CPO recording (Gramophone August 1994, p104) writes: "The plot is not like Goethe's, except at a considerable remove, and not very satisfactory. Sated with pleasure, Faust aspires to fine deeds (as in Goethe), but is caught up in a tangled set of relationships with two women, Röschen and Kunigunde, each of whom has another suitor. Faust manages to make a shambles of it all, somehow enabling Mephistopheles to drag him off to Hell." Perhaps it did not seem so unlikely to Spohr; after all, he too had been "caught up in a tangled set of relationships with two women" so that when he came to set Faust's great Act II recitative and aria *Wie ist mir!* he would have known from personal experience the torn emotions and feeling of guilt. The two women, of course, are Rosa Alberghi and Dorette Scheidler.

Before expanding on this point it is interesting to note Spohr's comments earlier in his memoirs about his other romantic relationships, for instance at page 15 of the 1865 English translation: "It is now time to mention that the young artist, from his earliest youth, was very susceptible to female beauty, and already when a boy fell in love with every beautiful woman. It is therefore not to be wondered at that the diary of the youth of eighteen contains many pages of the outpourings of the emotions of his heart."

In Hamburg, it was "Miss Lütgens, the daughter of a music master...a girl of thirteen." (Page 15); in Strelitz "Two girls stood before me, one with blue eyes, fair curls and beautiful as an angel, the other with black hair and eyes, less beautiful indeed than her companion but still not plain." (Page 21-22); while in Königsberg "Fräulein Rebecca Oppenheim...had again inflamed my too susceptible heart...'it is fortunate' says my diary 'that we leave tomorrow for Rebecca is a dangerous girl! He who loves his freedom and his peace must fly from her, and the sooner the better.'" (Page 30).

Moving on to Rosa and Dorette, although Spohr makes clear in his memoirs that he never proposed marriage to Rosa he does say that when he first saw her "I loved and was beloved...on my taking leave Rosa asked me to come again soon. I had already gazed too deeply into her brilliant dark eyes, to let her wait long for me." Later, when Spohr wanted to cool the relationship "Rosa's inclination towards me was much more earnest than I had believed, and I reproached myself bitterly for my conduct towards her. It was also evident to me that her father had only undertaken this journey [to give a concert in Brunswick] to bring me to some declaration in respect to his daughter. I therefore looked forward to their arrival with great anxiety. But everything passed off much better than I had anticipated. Rosa's heartfelt joy to see me again, her lively unsuspecting simplicity, which did not permit her to feel the least doubt of a reciprocity of her feelings, assisted me to the avoidance of any explanation." Does not Rosa's "lively, unsuspecting simplicity" exactly describe the character of Röschen? After a visit to Spohr's parents at Seesen they "embraced her as my betrothed". When Spohr discovered this he protested to his parents that Rosa's want of education and the difference in their religion (she was a Roman Catholic) were the grounds for his refusal of her. Some months later Spohr met Dorette, proposed to her, was accepted and "the next morning I announced my happiness to my parents. But before I could enjoy it without alloy, I felt compelled to write another letter, and one which was to me a most disagreeable task. I felt the injustice of my conduct towards Rosa and the necessity to ask her forgiveness. I had, it is true, never made a declaration of my love to her; but it had been but too apparent in the earlier period of our acquaintance. To that was added moreover the circumstance that my parents had greeted her in Seesen as my betrothed. What the arguments were that I resorted to in exculpation of my injustice I no longer remember at this distance of time. Probably I may have again adverted to the difference of religion which could alone serve me as excuse for my withdrawal." Spohr later discovered that Rosa had retired to a convent and taken the veil; surely to a Lutheran of Spohr's background a fate to match Röschen's in the opera where she drowns herself after discovering the truth about Faust.