

A 19th CENTURY YORKSHIRE ADMIRER OF SPOHR

by Philip Scowcroft

THIS piece is by way of a footnote to a previous article of mine in the Journal¹. William Spark (1823-1897), born in Exeter, worked in Leeds for most of his life, as organist at St. George's Church from 1850 and then as borough organist 1859-97, in which capacity he became heavily involved in the Leeds Triennial Festival. He composed, notably an oratorio *Immanuel*, performed at the Leeds Festival, and many shorter works, mostly sacred in character, wrote several books on church music, choirs, organs and his own reminiscences and lectured widely.

Spark was an undoubted admirer of Spohr and continued to carry a torch for him even at a time when his reputation was beginning to decline, as happens after the death of so many composers. Apart from giving the all-Spohr recital detailed in the previous article, he published in September 1876² *Short Pieces for the Organ*, an album of his settings of music by Bach, Handel, Schumann and Batiste and a "favourite arrangement" from Spohr's *Faust* ("favourite" implies that Spark had played this frequently in his recitals). Then, in the following year (13th November 1877) he came to Doncaster's Corn Exchange to give, under the auspices of the YMCA, an illustrated lecture on "The Vocal Music of the Victorian Age". Composers discussed included Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer, Auber, Gounod, Sir Henry Bishop, S. S. Wesley³, Julius Benedict, Sullivan, Henry Smart⁴ — and Spohr. According to the report of the lecture⁵ Spark said that Spohr's music "was singularly difficult to play, from the chromatic changes and transitions contained in it — peculiarities which had a host of feeble imitators ... feeble because [they found him] difficult to imitate and thus what was strong and beautiful in Spohr was weakness and insipidity in others." Spohr was illustrated in the lecture by a solo *Love and Courage*⁶, sung by a Mr. Dodds (bass), one of four singers Spark brought with him from Leeds for the purpose of providing illustrations.

It is a pity that Spark's music seems to have disappeared so completely, as it is possible that this, like that of his teacher S. S. Wesley, showed traces of Spohr's influence. At all events it seems clear that, due to the enthusiasm of men like Spark, Spohr's music remained popular in the North of England for at least as long as it did anywhere else in this country.

Notes

1. "A 19th Century Spohr Curiosity from Leeds" in *Spohr Journal* 8 (1981), pp.3-5.
2. Ashdown and Parry.
3. Spark's teacher from 1842 onwards.
4. A close friend of Spark.
5. *Doncaster Gazette*.
6. I have not identified this piece.