

SPOHR AND THE BRASS BAND 'OPEN'

by Philip Scowcroft

THE Open, held at various venues in Manchester since 1853 is the oldest extant brass band championship. Until the Great War the test piece was invariably a classical selection, usually operatic but sometimes from a cantata or oratorio. One or two of the operas excerpted seem rather obscure to us in 1996: "Elaine" (Bernberg, 1893), "Gabriella" (Pizzi, 1896) and "L'Ebreo" (Appoloni, 1902), for example.

On three occasions, in 1874, 1877 and 1879, Spohr was favoured, in 1874 by a selection from "Faust", in 1877 by a selection from "Jessonda" and in 1879 by a selection from "The Last Judgment" (The winning bands in those years were respectively Linthwaite, Meltham Mills and Black Dyke).

Two matters call for comment. First, by the 1870s Spohr was rather past his peak in popularity, thus suggesting the essential conservatism of the brass band movement. Second, the arrangements were all made by Charles Godfrey (1839-1919), who in fact provided the arrangements for every Open test piece between 1872 and 1921, two years after his death. He came from a family eight members of which achieved fame in banding and other forms of popular music; the Bournemouth Dan Godfrey was his nephew.

Trained at the Royal Academy, Bandmaster of the Scots Fusiliers and the Royal Horse Guards, he was a professor at the Royal College of Music and the Guildhall School. In his youth Spohr would have been at the height of his fame in Britain and this may explain Godfrey's recourse to his music three times during the 1870s.