

SPOHR IN THE VICTORIAN BALLROOM

by Philip Scowcroft

SPOHR'S music made a considerable effect on Victorian Britain. Snippets of it were adapted as anthems and regularly sung in church services. Brass bands enjoyed it!¹ And, somewhat adapted, his work even appeared in the ballroom of the day.

Music for dancing and music for the concert hall had undergone a rapprochement in the promenade concerts put on by Louis Jullien and his orchestra all over the United Kingdom in the 1840s and 1850s. As a composer (or sometimes compiler), Jullien was essentially a provider of dance music and this was taken up in ballrooms up and down the country. He had many British-born imitators, among them Charles Coote, C.H.R. Marriott and Charles d'Albert.

D'Albert (1809-1886) was especially prolific. At one time he had about 300 works in print simultaneously, for either piano solo or piano duet. From a publisher's catalogue of the 1860s we can see that piano solo copies were available of 81 of his quadrille titles, 76 waltzes, 64 polkas and 48 galops and miscellaneous dances. A large proportion of each of these categories also had piano duet versions and 44 quadrilles, 32 waltzes, 23 polkas and 13 galops etc were available in arrangements for full orchestra and some of them even in military band versions.

Some were original compositions but many were derived from operas popular at the time, by Flotow (*Martha*, of course), Verdi (at least several titles), Weber, Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini, Auber, Meyerbeer – yes, and even Spohr, as the catalogue alludes to versions for piano solo and piano duet of d'Albert's *Jessonda Waltz*. The opera *Jessonda* could have made a particular impression on d'Albert as a young man as by the time of the catalogue it would have been some 40 years old, having been first performed in 1823². However, it was revived in London in 1853 and it is more likely to have been the commercial opportunities provided by this revival which gave d'Albert the motivation for his waltz. The *Jessonda Waltz* was apparently not one of those available in orchestral parts so its appeal for larger ballrooms would have been limited; but it was doubtless in demand for smaller-scale dances.

D'Albert, incidentally, was the father of the more famous Eugene d'Albert (1864-1932), virtuoso pianist and the composer of the opera *Tiefland*. The senior d'Albert was born in France but came to Britain with his mother when in his early teens. The son was born in Scotland but as an adult settled in Germany.

Notes

1. See *Spohr Journal* 23 (Autumn 1996), page 6.
2. D'Albert also brought out a "valse diabolique" *Faust*, available in piano, orchestral and military band versions but, even though Spohr's *Faust* had been performed to acclaim in London in 1852, I am inclined to think that this *Faust* was derived from the (very recent) Gounod opera, not Spohr's.