

# SPOHR'S 'OSCAR': THE OSSIAN CONNECTION

by Keith Warsop

SOON after the 21-year-old Spohr took up the post of orchestra director at the court of Gotha in the summer of 1805 he fell in love with a young harpist, Dorette Scheidler, whom he was to marry on February 2nd, 1806. In courting the daughter, though, Spohr did not neglect the mother, Susanne Scheidler, a soprano member of the ducal musical establishment. He wrote: "The first piece that I composed in Gotha was a grand vocal scena for a soprano voice which I dedicated to Dorette's mother and which she sang with great applause at one of the court concerts." This "vocal scena" or concert aria is listed by Göthel as WoO.75 and given the composition date of autumn 1805 but so far as the text is concerned, he records "author unknown." It is certainly true that we do not know which poet at the Gotha court prepared the text for Spohr but the source drawn on for the subject matter is quite clearly Macpherson's "Ossian".

In the last week of March 1998, BBC Radio Three ran a series of programmes featuring music based on "sagas" which included King Arthur, the Nibelungs, the Kalevala and Ossian (though not Spohr's aria) but the notes attached to these listings in the "Radio Times" described Ossian as a "forgery" whereas the Kalevala was accepted as the Finnish national epic. In fact the composition of both Ossian and the Kalevala proceeded on similar lines. In his Oxford World Classics translation of the Finnish poem, Keith Bosley explains: "It was a work of literature based on the oral poetry of Karelia ..; it was a compilation of heroic poetry edited to form a more or less continuous narrative by Elias Lönnrot (1802-84), a Finnish scholar." He adds: "Lönnrot did his work so well that some people thought he had restored a lost epic from its scattered fragments" and discusses other such "compilations, including Ossian, allegedly a third century Gaelic epic bard, translated into English prose by James Macpherson [1736-96]. Dr Johnson had dismissed Macpherson's texts, published in the 1760s, as 'impudent forgeries'; but Scotland, still smarting after Culloden, had welcomed Ossian, while the response on the Continent had amounted to a craze. Modern research has shown that the texts are based on genuine material, but that Macpherson lacked the scholarship to do it justice."

That reference to the response on the Continent "amounting to a craze" explains how it was that by 1805 Spohr could set to music an aria based on Ossian, for the first translation into German was as early as 1769. Roger Fiske recorded: "Ossian translations were set by a great many composers, nine of them by Schubert alone, and early Ossianic operas abounded [...] we may also note *Ossian* by Lesuer (1804), *Uthal* by Méhul (1806; it requires no violins), and *Fingallo e Comela* by Pavesi."

Spohr's score of "Oscar" identifies the singer as "Malvina" who laments the loss of her lover, Oscar<sup>1</sup>. Dr Martin Wulffhorst supplies the following English translation (his copyright) after consulting Spohr's autograph:

*Recit.*

Oscar! In vain!

The distant echo only resounds with the lament of despair.

I am alone in the wide space,

My songs of longing remain unanswered!

Another realm owns the life of my dear beloved.

He smells the sweet scent of other flowers.

I may not hover lovingly around the youth,

May not breathe the sweet air with him!

Alas! I can only paint golden images for myself,

Images that memory brings to life,

And the lament of silence,

Can only attempt to bring back the days of happiness through magic.

*Aria*

When my Oscar was still here

Spring's flowers laughed for me,  
And time flew in a hurried dance.  
I made a wreath out of flowers  
And decorated his head with it.

But now he is gone,  
The golden star of my love,  
And what I found once  
Is now far from my longing.

Time does not flee any more in dancing,  
Nature does not decorate itself any more  
With the cheerful radiance of love.

The Gotha poet appears to be making a very free paraphrase of Malvina's lament from the opening section of "Croma" in Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* (1762):

It was the voice of my love! Few are his visits to the dreams of Malvina! Open your airy halls, ye fathers of mighty Toscar<sup>2</sup>. Unfold the gates of your clouds; the steps of Malvina's departure are near. I have heard a voice in my dream. I feel the fluttering of my soul. Why didst thou come, O blast, from the dark-rolling of the lake? Thy rustling wing was in the trees, the dream of Malvina departed. But she beheld her love, when his robe of mist flew on the wind; the beam of the sun was on his skirts, they glittered like the gold of the stranger. It was the voice of my love! few are his visits to my dreams!

But thou dwellest in the soul of Malvina, son of mighty Ossian. My sighs arise with the beam of the east; my tears descend with the drops of night. I was a lovely tree, in thy presence, Oscar, with all my branches round me; but thy death came like a blast from the desert, and laid my green head low; the spring returned with its showers, but no leaf of mine arose. The virgins saw me silent in the hall, and they touched the harp of joy. The tear was on the cheek of Malvina: the virgins beheld me in my grief. Why art thou sad, they said; thou first of the maids of Lutha? Was he lovely as the beam of the morning, and stately in thy sight?

So Spohr's connection with Ossian in 1805 places him among the earliest pioneering spirits of the German musical romantic movement on whom Macpherson's "epic" proved to be such a potent inspiration.

#### Notes

1. Oscar is the heroic son of Ossian and has been killed through treachery in a way similar to Siegfried in Wagner's Ring cycle.
2. Confusingly, Toscar is Malvina's father!

#### References

- Brahms and Scotland by Roger Fiske (*Musical Times* December 1968, No.1510, Vol. 109; pp. 1106-1111)  
The Kalevala: An Epic Poem after oral tradition by Elias Lönnrot, translated from the Finnish with Introduction and Notes by Keith Bosley (OUP The World's Classics 1989, pp. xv-xvi, xxxi)  
The Poems of Ossian and Related Works by James Macpherson, edited by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh UP 1996, p.187)