

LATE VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN SPOHR REVIVALS

by Philip L. Scowcroft

1. The Last Judgment in Doncaster, 1907

PERFORMANCES of Spohr's music, and particularly his choral works, were the exception rather than the rule in this country (and most others) during the first half of the 20th century. When they did take place they rarely attracted much public attention. However on December 5, 1907, Doncaster seems to have achieved one of the exceptions to that rule. As the *Doncaster Gazette* put it in its report of December 13:

"The rendering of Spohr's *Last Judgment* on Thursday last at Doncaster Parish Church by the Parish Church choir augmented by Mr Wilfrid Sanderson's ladies' choir¹ and a few outside bass and tenor vocalists was a great success ... we must highly congratulate Mr Sanderson ... The oratorio is peculiarly suited to church work ... Probably never since the old choral festival days² has the magnificent church been the scene of such a huge gathering for music. Every available portion was occupied ... many people had to turn reluctantly away."

This popularity is indeed remarkable to us, even though the performance was in aid of work to the church's superb Schulze organ³. The arrangement of the pews in St George's Parish Church is different now from what it was in 1907, but it is likely that they would have seated at least 800, and probably more, at full capacity. The performance appears to have been worthy of the support thus accorded to it. The organist (not, of course, Sanderson on this occasion as he was conducting) was Mr T. Maidment of Rotherham Parish Church, who was praised for his "careful and clever accompaniments". He had to "fill in" the wind and brass parts as the orchestra, led by Charles Reasbeck⁴ and "thoroughly efficient" comprised strings and timpani only. The chorus included 66 voices on the night⁵, the upper parts mixing trebles and female sopranos, male altos and contraltos. The *Gazette* report stated that it was "generally well under Mr Sanderson's command". It continued:

"The light and shade were well marked but ... we should like to have heard the crescendo passages better worked up, especially in the chorus 'Destroyed is Babylon'."

The solos were all taken by choristers from the church choir. Master Ellis, treble, a pupil of Sanderson, Mr Jones, alto, Mr J. M. Walker, tenor, and Messrs E. Armitage, E. S. Whittle and A. A. Bell, secretary of the Doncaster Musical Society, basses. Apparently all did well.

The performance was a "one-off". In preceding generations the church choir had sung snippets of Spohr as anthems, including "Blest are the departed" from this very oratorio, to mark notable deaths⁶, but with the new century these dropped out of the repertoire for good. Sanderson's successors at the Parish Church, both of whom subsequently took up cathedral appointments, were not Spohr enthusiasts; H. A. Bennett, in, post 1923-30, favoured Bach and perhaps British music of much earlier and more recent ages than Spohr, and Percy Saunders (1930-46) followed that general line with only changes of detail⁷. Even Sanderson, with so many other irons in the fire, never returned to Spohr, but his single contribution to British performances of the German composer's music should not be overlooked.

Notes

- 1) Sanderson (1878-1935) was Organist of Doncaster Parish Church 1904-23 and had charge of a choir of around 45 voices. He also conducted the Doncaster Musical Society (1911-24) in major choral works and both Doncaster's then (and still) existing amateur operatic societies from their respective

inceptions in 1909 and 1922. He is still remembered for his 170-odd songs of the ballad type ("Friend o' mine", "Devonshire cream and cider", "Drake goes west", "Until", "Up from Somerset", etc) and the present Director of Music at the church is also reviving his miniatures for piano solo. His "ladies' choir" was a group of around 20 voices drawn from his vocal pupils locally. For further details on Sanderson see this writer's *British Light Music: A Gallery of 20th Century Composers* (Thames Publishing 1997), pp. 88-92.

- 2) The reference is to the get-togethers of the so-called Doncaster Choral Union between 1864 and 1884: massed church choirs from all over what is now South Yorkshire and indeed beyond, totalling up to a maximum of 628 voices, which gave two choral services on a single day, usually in May. These were great occasions in their own right, requiring meticulous organisation, and the experience thereby gained by both large and small choirs undoubtedly improved the quality of the musical side of church services all over the Doncaster region.
- 3) Eventually completed in 1910.
- 4) Reasbeck was conductor of the Doncaster Orchestral Society (Doncaster's leading orchestral ensemble from 1885 to around 1925, although it survived until 1937) between 1894 and 1914. His players on this occasion (4 first violins, 3 seconds, 2 violas, 2 cellos, 1 double bass), all named in the *Gazette* report, were drawn from the personnel of the D.O.S.
- 5) Made up of 24 trebles, 8 female sopranos, 4 male altos, 9 contraltos, 10 tenors and 11 basses. Press previews of the performance had promised a choir of 75, a figure rather smaller, but not too much so, than the choral strength of the Doncaster Musical Society at that time. The *Gazette* report commented that in preparing the Spohr for performance, Sanderson had been plagued with illness among his choral forces and particularly among his soloists.
- 6) Including that of W. E. Gladstone.
- 7) I recall his enthusiasm for Stainer, for example.

2. The performance of Spohr in Bournemouth 1893-1914

PRIOR to his modest revival in recent years, which has by and large taken place on record rather than in the concert hall, the performance of Spohr's music suffered a long decline. One tends to think of this decline as beginning around the end of the Victorian era, but there were certainly a number of exceptions to that rule, if indeed it was one. The performance of *The Last Judgment* in Doncaster in 1907 (see above) was one and the programmes of Dan Godfrey's Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra (formed in 1893) up to the start of the Great War constitute another.

Unsurprisingly the most popular work in that period was the eighth Violin Concerto (*Gesangszene*), which received six Bournemouth performances between 1895 and 1914. Not that this was the only Spohr violin concerto to be aired in the resort as the Seventh figured during the 1899-1900 season, the Ninth in 1911-12 and even a concerto for two violins was performed in 1902. Two Spohr symphonies, also an overture, unspecified but probably *Faust* or *Jessonda* (1897-98), also figured in Godfrey's pre-1914 programmes; the Third Symphony was performed just once (1905-6), but the Fourth (*The Consecration of Sound*), first heard there in 1896-97, was revived in full no fewer than four times up to 1910 and its *Andantino* was heard on its own in 1914.

The Great War appears to have been a cut-off point in Spohr appreciation in Bournemouth as Godfrey apparently never thereafter revived him prior to his retirement in 1934 and, so far as I am aware, his immediate successors did not do so either.

Note: The information for this article is taken from Stephen Lloyd, *Sir Dan Godfrey, Champion of British Composers* (Thames 1995).