

AN EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT OF SPOHR'S VIOLIN PLAYING

by Hans Michel Schletterer translated by Celia Skrine

In 1879-84 Breitkopf & Härtel published a collection of essays on music, the Sammlung musikalischer Vorträge. This highly respected series, edited by Paul von Walderssee (1831-1906), includes monographs by distinguished writers on great composers, compositions and musical questions. No. 29, published in 1881, is devoted to Spohr and written by Hans Michel Schletterer (1824-93), one of his pupils, who later contributed the article on the composer for the German equivalent of the Dictionary of National Biography. Though couched in somewhat effusive and repetitive language, in the manner of the time, this monograph gives much useful information about Spohr as well as a very detailed chronological catalogue of his works. Newly translated, perhaps for the first time in full, this slightly condensed extract describes Spohr in performance.

RIGHT from the start, when Spohr first appeared in public, his playing attracted a great deal of attention and aroused universal admiration. He played in Leipzig on December 10, 1804 and again on December 17 [he was then aged 20]. In the *Leipziger Musikalische Zeitung* vol. 7, Friedrich Rochlitz reported the occasion as follows: "In both concerts he gave more enjoyment and satisfaction than any other violinist in living memory apart from Rode. Herr Spohr is undoubtedly one of the greatest violinists of our day [...] He performed a large-scale concerto in D minor of his own composition and another in E minor, both of them among the most beautiful in the repertoire — indeed, we know of none to surpass the first of the two as regards inventiveness, charm and depth of feeling on the one hand and compositional rigour on the other. His particular character tends towards grandiloquence and a romantic melancholy. The same description could be applied to his wonderful playing. He can do whatever is demanded of him, but it is the qualities already mentioned that particularly captivate audiences. Correctness of execution in the broadest sense is something that can be taken for granted in Herr Spohr's playing [...]. Perfect purity, accuracy, self-confidence, outstanding dexterity, every conceivable bowing technique, every nuance of violin tone, even at moments of the greatest difficulty — all this makes him the most skilful of virtuosos. But the soul that infuses his playing, the flights of fancy, the fire, the tenderness, the inner sincerity, the refinement of taste, added to his insight into the heart of every piece he plays — all this makes him a true artist. The latter quality is something we admire in him more than in any other violinist, and it is particularly evident when he plays quartets. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that audiences everywhere adore him and are left with no other wish but to keep him there and listen to him for ever. [...]"

It was while Spohr was touring Southern Germany with his first wife, a harpist whose talents rivalled his own, that my revered and worthy piano teacher, the Ansbach city and abbey organist G. T. Maier, heard the pair of them play in a series of concerts in Erlangen. Maier was a man of exquisite taste and balanced judgment whose pronouncements were anything but effusive, tending rather to the dry and sarcastic. Being still a young man and very fully occupied with piano lessons, he did not reach the concert hall until the very moment when the performance was about to begin. The house was packed to overflowing, with people standing all the way down the stairs, so excited and overawed that they scarcely dared to breathe. Maier, arriving so late, had to take the last available place, with no view into the hall. Yet decades later, when, in old age, he

recalled that concert, his eyes would light up and his normally grave countenance would beam as if transfigured, as he reminisced: "It was like hearing the angels sing! I have never heard anything like it, before or since; never have I been so profoundly impressed either by a violinist's playing or by such perfect ensemble." Today I too, looking back on the distant days of my youth, have to admit that Spohr's playing made upon me the deepest and purest musical impressions I have ever known.

When Spohr's tall, imposing figure, a head taller than anyone around him, came forward, his violin under his arm, to the music stand — he never played from memory as he wished to avoid any impression of having slavishly learnt a piece by heart, a practice he considered incompatible with a truly artistic approach — and acknowledged the audience by bowing in his inimitable way, dignified without arrogance, full of grace and self-confidence, and when his expressive blue eyes calmly surveyed the crowd, the whole assembly was filled with an atmosphere close to religious awe. All whispering ceased, all irrelevant thoughts were stilled. With regal courtesy he gave the signal for the work to commence. As he raised his marvellous Stradivarius [...], prepared to play and executed the first majestic runs, everyone listened with bated breath. His first bow-stroke had gripped every member of the audience. This little instrument, over which he had such complete mastery, was like a toy in the hands of a giant. Spohr's nonchalant ease, his elegance and his complete control defy description. His figure at the music stand was as calm as if cast in bronze; but the sinuous grace of his movements and the playful expertise with which he performed even the most difficult passages [...] were quite inimitable. His hands were uniquely supple and soft, powerful and elastic. His fingers, though steel-hard as he pressed them on the strings, were so mobile that not a note was lost from even the most rapid passages and trills. If his left hand was perfect, his right arm was even more so. There was no bow-stroke that he could not execute with mastery, although his mezzo-staccato was of particularly stunning effectiveness. But even more remarkable than his bowing technique was his tone, which cascaded from his violin like a great waterfall. [...] And when his performance came to an end and was greeted with wildly enthusiastic applause willing him to prolong the concert, this great artist took leave of his happy, cheering audience with the same calm, dignified nod and benign smile with which he had greeted them at the start.