

# SPOHR, HOFFMANN AND A NEGLECTED REVIEW

by Paul P. Gubbins

**I**N HIS Autobiography Spohr describes the favourable reception that attended his first symphony (in E $\flat$  major, Op.20) and he substantiates his account by quoting from a notice which appeared in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (Music Journal; hereafter abbreviated as *AMZ*): “We ... confess also, that for many years we have scarcely heard a new work of this kind, which possesses so much originality, without singularity and affectation; so much richness and science, without artifice and bombast. We may confidently predict that, when published, it will become a favourite piece with every great and skilled orchestra, and with all serious and cultivated audiences; but it requires both.”<sup>1</sup> Spohr adds that the symphony was performed at a Gewandhaus concert, although the edition of the *AMZ* from which the above was taken makes no reference to this, stating only that the work was heard in Leipzig at one of the weekly concerts given over two evenings, when another of the pieces performed was Beethoven’s second symphony<sup>2</sup>.

It is curious that Spohr chose to include in his Autobiography this brief notice and, at the same time, to make no mention of the highly significant, full-length review of the first symphony that appeared in the *AMZ* later in 1811<sup>3</sup>. One can only speculate on the reasons for this omission; certainly the notice was succinct, generally enthusiastic and therefore eminently quotable; nonetheless the review, while entering into considerable detail about the symphony, contained much that might equally have lent itself to insertion in the Autobiography. Moreover the review, despite having appeared anonymously in the *AMZ*, carried the distinction – and this Spohr would likely have known, although it could have slipped his mind at the time the Autobiography was compiled – that it had been contributed by one of the most gifted men of the age, a person who in 1811 was just beginning to make a name for himself: E. T. A. Hoffmann.

Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann – “Amadeus”, out of deference to Mozart, replaced the third name Wilhelm with which Hoffmann had been christened – was born in Königsberg, in East Prussia, just over two hundred years ago, on January 24th, 1776, and accordingly it seems meet that in the bicentennial year of his birth some mention should be made of the link between Hoffmann and Spohr. Hoffmann was, by profession, a lawyer; by inclination, however, he was a highly consummate artist, being music critic and composer before turning almost wholly to literature. Throughout his life Hoffmann never totally abandoned his legal interest; after a chequered start to his career he was appointed in 1816 – through the patronage of Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, a lifelong and subsequently influential friend – to the Prussian Supreme Court in Berlin where the undemanding claims of a civil service post provided the necessary free time and the financial security to enable Hoffmann to devote himself more fully to the creative arts. Even as a young man it was the law that, perversely enough, had supported Hoffmann’s artistic inclinations; following an unfortunate love affair with a slightly older and married woman, who had taken piano lessons from him, and then, some years later, as a result of a widely-circulated caricature that he had drawn of the commanding officer of the military garrison in the town of Posen. Hoffmann’s seniors had twice seen fit to discipline him by posting him away from the cultural centres of Germany to small and bucolic towns, Glogau and Plock, which were entirely devoid of any significant musical or literary activity. Here, amid the comparative

tranquillity, and far away from the distractions afforded by larger communities, Hoffmann was able to develop his artistic interests, turning his attentions particularly to music and to music criticism. It was in Glogau, for example, that his first opera *Die Maske* (The Mask) was completed.

In 1804 Hoffmann was transferred to Warsaw, moving thence to Berlin for a year and finally to Bamberg, where he remained until 1812 as music director and assistant producer at the municipal theatre. This was a period of intense musical activity for Hoffmann, and it also witnessed his most celebrated articles for the *AMZ*, including his review of Beethoven's fifth symphony (*AMZ* July 4th and 11th, 1810), and the review of Spohr's first symphony. At this time too, Hoffmann began to devote himself increasingly to literature; his first short story appeared in 1809, to be followed closely by tales concerned with the fictitious musician Johannes Kreisler. Just as it is possible – indirectly – to trace a connection between the law and music in Hoffmann's younger days, so too it is possible – directly – to trace a connection between music and literature in this later stage of Hoffmann's life. Thus from 1812 onwards, to his death on June 25th, 1822, Hoffmann was concerned primarily with literature, although it is significant to note that many of his short stories are either about music ("Rath Krespel": Councillor Krespel) or about the creative person ("Der goldne Topf": The Golden Pot), while one of his two full-length novels contains the "fragmentary biography" of Johannes Kreisler (*Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr*: Reflections of Tomcat Murr). Music, even during the final and essentially literary phase of Hoffmann's life, was never far away, and during this period he found time to continue his reviews for the *AMZ* and compose the widely acclaimed score for the opera *Undine* (performed in 1816).

Undoubtedly, therefore, Hoffmann was one of the most accomplished and versatile men of his times, and yet the chameleon-like impression that he gives has encouraged posterity to look upon him as a mere "jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none". The scope of his art and the range of his talent have bewildered and perplexed successive generations, so that today Hoffmann is remembered mainly for the tales which have inspired writers and composers alike. Hoffmann's influence can be detected in the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, while Offenbach (*Les Contes d'Hoffmann*), Schumann (*Kreisleriana*) and Hindemith (*Cardillac*), to name but a few, paid homage to him in music. In view of the popularity of the tales it is easy to overlook Hoffmann's contribution to music and to music criticism which is unfortunate since, if the review of Spohr's first symphony may be considered at all typical, Hoffmann reveals himself to be a shrewd and diligent reviewer with a firm understanding of his subject. In lucid, laconic language he combines observations of Spohr's symphony with comments on the state of contemporary music, thus rendering the review doubly interesting. Without doubt, Hoffmann was one of those rare people who have the ability to transform the task of criticism into an art in its own right.

The review opens with a lengthy paragraph in which Hoffmann outlines the general nature of the symphony and describes his reaction to it. He notes: "The symphony is full-bodied, scored with understanding and well arranged in all its various parts<sup>4</sup>." He continues, though, by indicating something of a paradox. "In spite of striving for an expression of strength and power, which manifests itself not infrequently, the character of the symphony is defined more by the bounds of calm and dignity, which are inherent in the themes chosen and which to suit the genius of the composer better than the raging fire that rushes like a river through the symphonies of Mozart and Beethoven." Because of this, Hoffmann feels, "the themes are pleasant melodies, rather than meaningful thoughts that penetrate deep into the minds of the listeners as is so very much the case with the composers already mentioned (ie, Mozart and Beethoven), and also with Haydn." It is noteworthy here, early in the review, Hoffmann is careful to disclose the identities of the three composers whom he most esteemed (a trinity often encountered in his writings); a revealing

confession, for it is indicative of the standards by which Spohr's symphony is to be assessed.

Thus it is no mean tribute to the composer when Hoffmann, in the following sentence, extols the first symphony in the most glowing and enthusiastic terms, comparing it very favourably indeed with other contemporary compositions. He writes: "Certainly, the composer whose first symphony is conceived in such a manner arouses the finest and highest expectations; we can count ourselves lucky to be able once again to reckon with good, honest symphonies, which recently have been few and far between." Clearly, Hoffmann recognises the worth and quality of Spohr's symphony, and his perspicacity in being one of the first to prophesy an auspicious future for the composer reflects creditably on the taste and insight of the reviewer. The positive overall impression that Hoffmann gives of the symphony is scarcely marred by the "minor quibbles" on which he later voices his opinion, for he expresses confidence that the composer will soon eschew the defects which detract – albeit slightly – from the work. "The too-frequent recurrence of certain favoured passages, eg, the chromatic descent in the bass; the repetition of series of chords that have outlived their usefulness – these this sagacious composer will easily learn to avoid, and precisely because he is sagacious he will learn how to treat his themes with greater harmonic dexterity<sup>5</sup>." The general survey of the symphony concludes with a further eulogy to Spohr: "The attention with which the reviewer has heard and perused the work of this worthy composer, and the esteem in which he has learned to hold him because of it, may be proven by the fact that he cannot help but explore deeper into this full-bodied composition and, while allowing himself minor quibbles here and there, bring to the light of day the excellence of individual moments in the work."

Hoffmann now turns his attention to specific aspects of the symphony and he assesses each movement in turn. A discussion on counterpoint dominates the comments pertaining to the allegro of the first movement, for, although Hoffmann feels this movement to be superior to the other three, he holds that Spohr's failure to make effective use of inverted counterpoint tarnishes an otherwise resplendent achievement. It would be better, Hoffmann argues, had Spohr used the "fruitful main theme in sundry contrapuntal twists and turns ... and perhaps had interwoven fewer abrupt secondary themes" into the movement. He continues: "Without wishing to delve into a mass of pointless scholarship, it is certainly advantageous to arrange the main theme of a movement in such a manner that it can, in various ways, be treated contrapuntally; for every composer knows that a movement, which in its initial form is not possessed of particularly original sound, often assumes a quite new and striking character when inverted in some way." Hoffmann then quotes the example of Haydn: "Who carries this skill further, combining it with the most mellifluous and singable melodies, than the immortal Haydn." Yet, notwithstanding the misgivings that Hoffmann airs with regard to Spohr's approach to counterpoint, the reviewer is unbridled in his praise of the allegro: "There is not a movement to be heard which, without lapsing into the trivial or the tasteless, would be more melodic or mellifluous than the theme of the ... allegro."

The name of Haydn is also invoked during the discussion of the second movement, the larghetto. Hoffmann remarks on the similarity that exists between this and several of the andante movements in Haydn's symphonies, and yet he feels that Spohr's larghetto is inferior. He writes: "As above, in a way the reviewer outlined the character of the whole symphony, so too this second movement is very pleasant, well-arranged in its various parts and executed with discretion; nonetheless it lacks that sense of importance which forcibly stirs the spirit of the listener and pulls him along. Often, Haydn andantes begin in a simple, childlike, almost trifling manner, but the sense of importance and dignity breaks through unexpectedly and bathes the listener in its rays."

Turning now to the third movement, the scherzo allegro, Hoffmann raises two main objections. Firstly, he finds the scherzo too long<sup>6</sup>, maintaining that Haydn and Mozart – "quite

properly” – never wrote scherzos at such length. Secondly, Hoffmann condemns Spohr’s practice of using a variety of keys in rapid succession: “The reviewer mentions here the idiosyncrasy of the composer in modulating very quickly from one key to another purely because it occurs most frequently in the scherzo”. He continues with a general comment: “Certainly the true skill of the composer lies not in rapid transitions from key to key, or in slipping from one key to another; the gifted composer will stir the enraptured listener by quite simple means, by the original and agreeable nature of the movement and by the harmonic variations which arise directly from it.”

To the final movement Hoffmann devotes comparatively little space; he considers this to be the least successful of the four movements. “The finale has a pleasant but, the reviewer feels, altogether too frivolous theme.” Hoffmann detects in it “something skipping, which does not accord with the character of the symphony as presented in the first movement.” He continues: “Again, the movement is arranged and scored with great insight, except that it has less import than the initial allegro ...” A work written for a large orchestra – such as the one assembled at Frankenhausen, for which the symphony was designed – must, Hoffmann feels, “be kept simple and wholly free from caprice.” Furthermore, he finds the ending to the movement – and thus to the symphony – far too abrupt and brief, contrasting this to the more usual state of affairs that prevailed at the time: “Contemporary composers are often found wanting in a completely opposite way, and there are now overtures (in particular) which seem almost incapable of reaching their conclusion, for they pile ending upon ending which is fatiguing for the listener and injurious to the appearance of the whole work.”

Despite the plethora of adverse remarks that seem to dominate the review, it must be remembered that these were but “minor quibbles”, concerned with detailed and specific aspects of the symphony. Consequently, their importance must not be exaggerated to the point where all perspective on the review is lost; the fact remains that Hoffmann was most impressed with Spohr’s first symphony and considered it to be one of the finest pieces of music to have appeared in Germany for some time. The review abounds in admiration for the composer, and it is worthwhile to bear this in mind. Let Hoffmann have the final word: “The composition is far superior to so much that has been written recently, and loudly acclaimed; therefore the reviewer felt it incumbent upon him to put down everything he thought and experienced in reading, hearing and then reading the symphony again. How easy to construct fine and masterly works upon a foundation such as this which lies at the behest of the composer!”

#### Notes

1) Louis Spohr: Autobiography (Reeves and Turner, London, 1878, Vol. 1, pp.150-151

2) Anonymous notice in *AMZ* Vol.13, No.22, May, 1811, p.379

3) *AMZ* Vol.13, No.48, Nov.27th, 1811, pp.797-806; and Vol.13, No.49, Dec. 4th, 1811, pp. 813-819

4) The translation, as all subsequent ones, is my own

5) cf Article by Christopher Tutt “Spohr’s Symphonies”, *Spohr Journal* 4, 1975, p. 14

6) *Ibid*

● *First published Spohr Journal* Five, 1976, pp. 1-5 when it carried the sub-title “a contribution for the bicentennial year of Hoffmann’s birth”