

HOW KASSEL REVIVED JESSONDA

by Lady Mayer

In 1959 the town of Kassel in Germany, famous for its long musical history, completed its new opera house to replace the older theatre destroyed during the war. And because it was Kassel where Spohr lived and worked for so long, the new theatre revived, in the centenary year of Spohr's death, his opera Jessonda. Lady Mayer, who went to see it, tells of the new theatre and the production.

KASSEL, capital of the German Land of Hesse, is proud of its long cultural history. It was in 1605 that it opened its first theatre, the first public theatre in Germany, the Ottoneum, still in existence. Later, when this became too small, another opera house was built, opened in 1909. It is this that was destroyed by bombardment in the war, replaced now by one of the most modern theatres in Germany.

Both outside and inside, the new building is startlingly contemporary in design, and is magnificently equipped technically. It is not too large – it is designed to seat just about 1,000 people – and it is used for both opera and drama. And it has taken only two years to build. The interior of the new theatre is on very modern lines: there is a wide stage, with a correspondingly wide auditorium, the stalls being built upwards towards the back in amphitheatre style so that everyone has a good view of the stage, and the tiers of seats are curved so that all face inwards towards the proscenium. There are stalls and a balcony, and a number of boxes “suspended” rather like those in London’s Royal Festival Hall; and wide and spacious foyers and corridors. It is, in fact, one of the finest small modern theatres I have seen.

Hitler banned it

Kassel’s permanent opera company was famous long before the war – indeed, it was famous throughout Europe in the 19th century when Spohr directed it for many years. He gave there many operas apart from his own – in one year 62 of them – including many which he himself did not like but which he felt should be produced and heard. And his long association with opera in the town was honoured this year for his centenary, and, in December, with the first production for many years of his opera *Jessonda*.

Although it is a long time since *Jessonda* was played in England, it must not be forgotten that it remained popular in many German opera houses right up to 1933 when the Hitler regime banned it on racial grounds because its “happy ending” united a white man and a coloured woman.

Jessonda had its first performance in Kassel in 1823, and it quickly spread throughout Europe, becoming as popular as Weber’s *Der Freischütz*. With it, Spohr took a leap into the future, introducing many operatic techniques later to be taken up by other composers. It was for a start the first durchkomponiert German opera – the first to be completely in music, without spoken dialogue. It marked the first appearance in opera, also, of the leitmotiv – the association of musical themes directly with personages or happenings, so magnificently developed later by Wagner. And it anticipated Wagner, in *Tristan und Isolde* for example, in use of the dramatic device known as the “long look”, as used by Wagner in the Potion scene in Act One of *Tristan*.

The success of *Jessonda* in its day lay in its natural, simple dramatic story and its careful musical treatment, both of which came as something fresh in contrast with Italian opera of the early 19th century, which had degenerated into a showground for voices used with superficial acrobatics.

It is set in India, a favourite scene for Romantic period tales, for in those days India was

“the romantic, mysterious East”, redolent of blazing colour and strange customs. Its story is very simple. Before it begins, we understand, the young Indian girl, Jessonda, had seen the young Portuguese officer Tristan da Cunha, and a youthful attraction had grown between them. In the meantime, however, Da Cunha had left Goa, the Portuguese colony in India, and Jessonda had been taken away by her father and married to an old rajah.

Doomed to be burned

When the opera opens, the old rajah has died and Dandau, the Brahmin high priest, is telling the young priest Nadori to convey to Jessonda that tradition demands the ceremony of suttee – that the widow shall be burned on the funeral pyre that consumes her husband’s body. Nadori, although himself a Brahmin, is horrified at the custom, and determines to try to do something to save Jessonda.

At the time there is war between the Hindus and the Portuguese, who are besieging the city of Goa. Nadori makes his way through the lines and reaches the general in command of the Portuguese forces who turns out to be none other than Tristan da Cunha. There is at the moment a truce in force, asked for by the Brahmins “to carry out an important religious ritual”. But when Tristan da Cunha learns what this ritual is to be he is disgusted. Nadori takes him to the sacred well, where Jessonda is performing the ceremony of purification for the coming suttee.

Dramatic rescue

Immediately, they recognise each other – the dramatic “long look” later to become famous in *Tristan* – and reveal to each other their early and continued love. But Dandau breaks in and tears Jessonda away. Nadori, however, tells Tristan da Cunha of a plot by the Hindus to use the truce for planning an attack, and then offers to lead the Portuguese forces by a subterranean passage into the city. In the final scene the Brahmin priests are gathered for the suttee ceremony. But just as the pyre is about to be lit, after Jessonda has sung the great aria “Hohe Götter” in an appeal to the gods for mercy, a violent storm occurs, during which the Portuguese arm breaks in and overwhelms the priests. Jessonda is rescued and the curtain falls on the reunited and happy pair.

For this dramatic story Spohr wrote some of his strongest and most original music, no doubt the reason for the opera’s enormous success. But of course it was scored for small orchestra, and parts of the libretto do appear somewhat dated for our modern tastes. But the music has appealed strongly to great musical minds over the years. Richard Strauss, in fact, had a project in mind to re-edit the score and to fit it to a new libretto by Dr Josef Gregor, librettist of Strauss’s three penultimate operas, *Friedenstag*, *Daphne* and *Die Liebe der Danae*. But he died before he could carry this out.

The music would be worth it – the great storm scene in the final act has wonderfully expressive music, but needs orchestration larger than that which Spohr wrote for the small theatre in which he produced it. The production at Kassel certainly did something to reveal to a modern audience an opera which, a sensation in its day, still has much to give to music-lovers of today in music and drama.

●*Lady Mayer’s article first appeared in Records and Recordings in 1959 and was reproduced, with their kind permission, in the first Spohr Journal in 1970. She gave much support to the original plan to form the Spohr Society of Great Britain and accepted the position of President. This article is reprinted here as a tribute to her work on behalf of Spohr and the Society.*