

# SPOHR AND THE CHALLENGE OF ART

by Keith Warsop

**W**ILHELM Speyer, a Frankfurt banker, amateur composer and an old friend of Spohr, helped to organise a German Song Festival for male voice choirs to be held in Frankfurt in July 1838. For one of the concerts, which was to be held in a church, he asked Spohr and his colleague, Moritz Hauptmann, for newly-composed pieces.

Hauptmann, a leading music theoretician who, in 1842, was appointed to J.S. Bach's old post as Leipzig cantor, declined. In a letter to his friend, Franz Hauser, he explained:

'[Spohr's] last great work was a *Paternoster* for men's voices, written for the Frankfurt Festival. They wanted something of the same kind from me too, but I refused. I don't care for the genus.' (Hauptmann 1892, vol.1, pp.183-184)

In two later letters, he expanded on his dislike for the medium.

'I can't stand music – to wit, four-part music – for male voices only; it is an unnatural thing – the bare idea is a misconception: the 2 x 2 of the parts, to be rational, can only mean S: = J: B, it can only exist in the one and the other octave, otherwise it is a mere twisting of musical osiers.' (Hauptmann 1892, vol.1, p.221)

'I have just finished a chorus for men's voices [...] it is my first effort in writing for male voices only; in abstract I hate four-part songs for men, though in concrete I must confess there are good examples of it – e.g., Mendelssohn's. The strain of producing a double contrast from the high and low registers of the human voice, is repulsive to me, whereas twice two is a perfectly natural distribution between male and female voices. Of course, the actual notes can be reached, but the very high and the very low in such a range do not blend together. A bass growls the deep f, a tenor screams the high e; voices so different in character and strength are hopelessly at variance, and even when they go well together, the music soon gets monotonous; we have bare agreement, nothing more. In the long run, I am always bored by men's voices, and I don't care in the least for the festivals which are so popular now-a-days; I must have choral parts, male and female, properly distributed.' (Hauptmann 1892, vol.2, p.47)

Spohr was also doubtful but agreed to go ahead after setting out his misgivings in a letter to Speyer: 'There are particular difficulties because of the narrow vocal range and the monotony caused by similar voices.' (Speyer 1983, p.2)

In March 1838 Spohr was able to tell Speyer: 'I am sending you the "Vater Unser" with piano accompaniment for your rehearsals. We have sung it twice and I am now convinced that it will turn out well. Just here and there I have taken the second basses rather deep, so as not to remain in close harmony all the time.' (Speyer 1983, p.2)

Spohr was refused permission by the Electoral Prince of Hesse to attend the Festival so, after it had been held, Speyer reported to Spohr:

'From the newspapers you will have found out how successful and magnificent the Song Festival has turned out to be; I can only add that all descriptions fall short of the reality and that this Festival belongs in every respect among the finest and most enjoyable events that have probably ever taken place in Germany. As far as the effect of your "Vater Unser" is concerned, it was noble beyond measure; the two choirs were well separated so that their entries were sharply distinguished, and the *piano* and *forte* always correct, the solos went well and the choir was so gripping in its effect. Do not believe that I am exaggerating in the least, because I have never known such a successful performance with such forces.' (Speyer 1983, p.3)

This setting of Klopstock's 'Vater Unser' (WoO.70 in Göthel but identified as Op.104 in Spohr's own catalogue of his compositions) is certainly highly-rated by the Spohr scholars who know it. Spohr himself seems to have valued it very much, preparing a remarkable wind band version which was performed in the Vienna Concerts spirituels on 24th March 1839 (for two clarinets, basset-horn, two bassoons, double-bassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, ophicleide and timpani) and scoring it for full orchestra in January 1845 (for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings). This was performed in a Kassel subscription concert on 16th April 1845.

The contrast between the reaction of Hauptmann and Spohr to Speyer's commission highlights a particular trait of Spohr's artistic personality: the desire to take on a challenge, tackle a project bristling with difficulties and master them. On the other hand, Hauptmann's theoretical position prevented him from seeking out ways to combat the problems inherent in writing for male voice choir and, with hindsight, we can see how this trait also inhibited Hauptmann's ability to make his mark as a front-rank composer.

Something similar appears in the reaction of Spohr and Hauptmann to the music of Wagner. Whereas Hauptmann condemned *Tannhäuser* out of hand, Spohr persevered and conducted it in Kassel. Hauptmann stated in a letter to his friend Franz Hauser: 'I went to Dresden on purpose to be present at a performance of *Tannhäuser*, an opera by Wagner, which I am glad to have heard as I knew next to nothing of his music. His aims and tendencies are utterly foreign to the purposes of art, he aspires to that which no artist should aspire to and, could he realise his aim, it would be the destruction of all art.' (Hauptmann 1892, vol.2, p.46)

That was in 1847 and by 1859 he had not changed his views in another letter to Hauser: 'Did you hear what Schnyder said when he was asked his opinion of *Tannhäuser*? "I put Richard Wagner before Goethe and before Beethoven." This was a floorer to his questioners who couldn't believe he was speaking seriously. "Yes," he continued, "Wagner composes better than Goethe and he is more of a poet than Beethoven."' (Hauptmann 1892, vol.2, pp.125-126)

In contrast Spohr admitted eventually in a letter to Hauptmann 'with much of what was at first very disagreeable to me, I have become familiarised from frequent hearing [...] the chorus of pilgrims was performed with such pure intonation last night that I became somewhat reconciled for the first time to the unnatural modulations. It is astonishing what the human ear will by degrees become accustomed to!' (Spohr 1865, Vol. 2, pp.30-308)

This desire to face up to a challenge is something we see operating throughout Spohr's life, whether in composition or performance. From his *Autobiography* we can see how Spohr delighted in taking on such challenges:

**Opera.** 1806: I had long wished to try my hand at a dramatic composition but had never yet found a favourable opportunity. Neither indeed did that present itself now for Gotha possessed no theatre. Yet I thought that if the opera were once written, some opportunity to hear it might present itself. [...] But before I could begin my work, the storm of war broke loose. The battle of Jena had been fought. [...] This therefore was by no means the most propitious time for me to attempt a style of composition that was quite new to me. But as my study was situated near the garden, at a distance from the noise in the streets I soon succeeded in forgetting everything around me and gave myself up heart and soul to my work. (Spohr 1865, vol.1, pp.97-98)

1810: Before I left Hamburg another offer was made to me which gave me much pleasure. The celebrated manager, actor and author Schröder [...] had procured the librettos of four operas for which the music was now to be composed [...] the fourth, *Der Zweikampf mit der Geliebten* by Schink, was offered to me. [...] Little satisfied as I had hitherto been with my dramatic labours, the desire to make another trial was by no means diminished. I therefore accepted the

offer without much preliminary inquiry about the conditions and without submitting the libretto destined for me to any checks. (Spohr 1865, vol.1, p.138)

**Clarinet.** 1808: Herr Hermstedt, director of the harmonie-musik to Prince Sondershausen [...] had come to Gotha to request me to write a clarinet concerto for him for which the Prince [...] offered to pay a handsome gratuity. To this proposal I gladly assented as, from the immense execution together with the brilliancy of tone and purity of intonation possessed by Hermstedt, I felt at full liberty to give the reins to my fancy. When, with Hermstedt's assistance I had made myself better acquainted with the technique of the instrument, I went zealously to work and completed it in a few weeks. Thus originated the Concerto in C minor. (Spohr 1865, vol.1, p.124)

**Symphony.** 1811: In the spring Precentor Bischoff again paid me a visit and invited me to conduct a second grand musical festival which he intended giving in Frankenhausen. He also begged me to play a violin concerto on the second day of the festival and to write a grand symphony for the opening. Although I had not yet attempted that kind of composition I acceded with pleasure to his request. In this manner the opportunity presented itself for another interesting task and I immediately set about it with spirit. Although hitherto it had been usual with me to lose after a time all taste for my first essays in a new style of composition, this symphony was an exception to the rule for it has pleased me even in later years. (Spohr 1865, vol.1, p.150)

**Oratorio.** 1812: I found a letter from Bischoff in which he informed me that he had been commanded by the Governor of Erfurt to make arrangements for a grand musical festival there in the ensuing summer in celebration of the birthday of Napoleon on the 15th August. He [...] asked me to undertake its direction and to write a new oratorio for the opening day. I had long desired to try, for once, something in the oratorio style and readily consented to the proposal. A young poet in Erfurt had already offered me the text of an oratorio in which I found several grand passages for composition. It was called *Das jüngste Gericht*. I sent for the libretto and set to work at once but I soon felt that for the oratorio style I was yet too deficient in counterpoint and fugue. I therefore suspended my work in order to undertake the preliminary studies necessary for the subject. From one of my pupils I borrowed Marpurg's 'Art of Fugue Writing' and was soon deeply and continuously engaged in the study of that work. (Spohr 1865, vol.1, p.157)

**Nonet.** 1813: After having finished *Faust* I thought it my duty to proceed to the fulfilment of my agreement with Herr von Tost. I therefore asked him what kind of composition he would now prefer. My art-Maecenas reflected a while and then suggested a Nonet, concerted for the four stringed instruments, violin, viola, violoncello and double-bass; and the five principal wind instruments, flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon, written in such a manner that the character of each instrument should be properly brought out. It might be both an interesting and grateful subject and he did not in the least doubt that I should successfully accomplish it. I felt attracted by the difficulty of the task, consented to it with pleasure and started work at once. This was the origin of the well-known Nonet. (Spohr 1865, vol.1, pp.179-180)

**Double Quartet.** 1823: A fancy seized me to carry out an idea I had long conceived and which, if I am not mistaken, Andreas Romberg, when we played a quartet together for the last time before his death, first spoke of, viz. to try my hand at a double quartet. The fact that Romberg had entertained the idea for several years without attempting it incited me to it yet more and I imagined to myself the manner in which he had also understood it; how two quartet groups sitting close to each other should play one piece of music and keep in reserve the eight-voice combination for the chief parts of the work only. According to this idea I wrote my first double quartet (D minor), began the theme of the first allegro with both quartets in unison and forte in order to impress it well upon the hearers and then carried it concerted through both quartets in turn. (Spohr 1865, vol.2, p.151)

**Programme symphony.** 1832: In the summer I was ordered by my physician to the well-known warm sulphur baths at Nenndorf to cure a stiffness in one of my knees which I had contracted during the winter while skating. My wife, who accompanied me, took with her, among other books, a volume of the poems of my friend Pfeiffer which was not published until after his death; and as I had long wished to set something from it to music in memory of him, I chose one of them, 'Die Weihe der Töne', which pleased me very much and appeared to me particularly well suited for the composition of a cantata. But when I was about to begin work I found that the text of this style of poem did not lend itself altogether well to a cantata; and I felt much more disposed to represent the subject matter in an instrumental composition. In this manner originated my fourth symphony under the title *Die Weihe der Töne*. [...] In the very first part I had for a task the construction of a harmonious whole from the sounds of nature. This, as indeed the whole work, was a difficult but highly attractive problem. (Spohr 1865, vol.2, pp.177-178)

**Waltz.** 1833: The music society at Marienbad, whose director was a local linen manufacturer, had much pleased and surprised me with a very successful performance of Cherubini's overture to *Medea* with which, by way of serenade, he had greeted my arrival. I the more readily complied with his wish to write a waltz for them *à la Strauss*, to which also my inclination to try every sort of composition had long predisposed me. At first, when I had practised their orchestra in it, the waltz pleased me very well; but afterwards I found it wanting in that freshness and originality which distinguish most of the waltzes of Strauss and Lanner. (Spohr 1865, vol.2, p.185)

**Songs, Op.154.** 1856: In the spring Spohr received a letter from a former pupil, the Detmold music director Kiel in which, at the desire of his Prince, he proposed to Spohr the composition of some songs for a baritone voice with piano and violin accompaniment. Although doubtful at first that such a combination would be suited to a deep male voice, he nevertheless interested himself in the trial and in a short time wrote a collection of six songs of the required kind with which he himself felt highly satisfied. (Spohr 1865, vol.2, pp.320-321)

This acceptance of a challenge also occurs in areas outside the compositional. Four examples from the *Autobiography* are as follows:

**Travelling carriage.** 1807: [...] the acquisition of an indispensable convenience for travelling, namely a travelling-carriage constructed at the same time for the transport of the harp. For a considerable time I turned over in my mind the form of structure best adapted to this purpose. There were two things that required special consideration; first, that it should not be too expensive; and second, that it should be sufficiently light for one pair of post-horses. At length I hit upon the right plan. I ordered a long, but not too heavy, basket-carriage to be built with a chaise compartment behind for the travellers. In front of this, between the basket sides, lay the box for the harp slung by leather straps and covered with a leather apron which fastened by means of a bar of iron hooking into the chaise seats in front of the occupants. Under this was a seat-box to hold my violin case and behind it a larger one to contain a trunk adapted to the space, in which all the other travelling requisites could be packed. In front, above the harp box, was the raised seat for the driver. A trial trip, for which the carriage was completely packed, showed that it fully answered the object proposed. Thus everything was in readiness for our artistic tour. (Spohr 1865, vol.1, pp.100-101)

**Horn playing.** 1808: The Emperor had sent [from Erfurt] to Paris for his tragic performers and every evening one of the classic works of Corneille or Racine was played. I and my companions had hoped for permission to see one such production but unfortunately I was told that they took place for the sovereigns and their suites only and that everybody else was excluded. I now hoped with the assistance of the musicians to obtain places in the theatre orchestra; but in this I also failed for they had been strictly forbidden to take anyone in with them. At length it occurred to

me that I and my three pupils, by taking the places of the same number of musicians who played between the acts, might then be enabled to remain during the performance. As we were willing to pay handsomely and the musicians knew that their substitutes would fill their places in a satisfactory manner they gave their consent. But now a new difficulty presented itself; three of us only could be introduced into the violins and basses and as none of us played any other orchestral instrument but those, one of us must of necessity remain excluded. The thought then struck me to attempt to learn the horn sufficiently by the evening to undertake the part of the second horn player. I immediately prevailed upon him to yield his horn to me and began my studies. At first I produced the most terrifying tones from it but after about an hour I succeeded in bringing out the natural notes of the instrument. After dinner, while my pupils went for a walk, I restarted my studies [...] and although my lips pained me very much yet I did not rest until I could play my horn part perfectly in the certainly very easy overture and entractes to be performed in the evening [...] at every succeeding entracte the pain of my lips increased and at the close of the performance they had become so much swollen and blistered that in the evening I could scarcely eat any supper. Even the next day on my return to Gotha they had a very negro-like appearance and my young wife was not a little alarmed when she saw me; but she was yet more nettled when, in a jesting tone, I said that it was from kissing to such excess the pretty Erfurt women! When, however, I related to her the history of my studies on the horn she laughed heartily at my expense. (Spohr 1865, vol.1, pp.117-119)

**Conducting.** 1810: In the spring, Bischoff, the leader of the choir at Frankenhausen, came to Gotha and offered me the direction of a musical festival. [...] He had already secured the assistance of the most celebrated singers as well as the most distinguished members of the court orchestras in the neighbouring Thuringian capitals and therefore had no doubt of the most brilliant success. As the junior director of these court orchestras I felt not a little flattered at having the leadership offered to me and accepted it with pleasure although I had never yet directed so large an orchestra and chorus as would be there assembled. [Spohr then quotes the review of the festival from Gerber's *Musical Journal*]. Herr Spohr's leading with a roll of paper, without the least noise and without the slightest contortion of countenance, might be called a graceful leading if that word were sufficient to express the precision and influence impressed by his movements upon the whole mass, strange both to him and to itself. To this happy talent in Herr Spohr I ascribe in great part the excellence and precision; the imposing power as well as the soft blending of this numerous orchestra with the voices of the singers in *The Creation*. (Spohr 1865, vol.1, pp.139-142)

**Vienna.** 1812: Vienna was at that time indisputably the capital of the musical world. The two greatest composers and reformers of musical taste, Haydn and Mozart, had lived there and there produced their masterpieces. The generation still lived which had seen them arise and formed their taste in art from them. The worthy successor of these art-heroes, Beethoven, still resided there and was now at the zenith of his fame and in the full strength of his creative power. In Vienna therefore the highest standard for art creations was set up and to please there was to prove one's self a master. I felt my heart beat as we drove over the Danube Bridge and thought of my approaching debut. My anxiety was yet more increased by the reflection that I should have to compete with the greatest violinist of the day; for in Prague I had heard that Rode had just returned from Russia and was expected in Vienna. I still vividly recalled to mind the overpowering impression which Rode's play had made upon me ten years before in Brunswick and how I had striven for years to acquire his method and execution. (Spohr 1865, vol.1, p.161)

Finally, the instillation of this segment of Spohr's personality can be traced back to his father, Carl Heinrich Spohr, who not only rose to challenges in his own life but brought the same

attitude to his son's upbringing. At the age of 16 Spohr's father ran away from his grammar school in Hildesheim where he feared punishment for misbehaviour and reached Hamburg where he undertook private tuition and other employment before saving enough money to enter Leipzig University. He studied medicine there and at the same time became a friend of a fellow-student, Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathy. Hahnemann was not bold enough to publish his own views so Spohr senior, who shared Hahnemann's beliefs, said he would do so under his own name. The publication achieved fame and Carl Heinrich Spohr also published the results of his own medical researches. Later on he became reconciled with his parents and became a successful medical practitioner.

Louis Spohr tells us how, when he was still a boy, he attempted to compose an opera but abandoned it as he felt his musical knowledge was not yet wide enough for such a task. Spohr's father gave him a hard time as he 'strongly insisted that every work once begun should be completed before another was commenced; and only because my father was convinced that I was unequal to so great a task was an exception made this time; but it was never allowed again. To this severity I owe my perseverance in working and I have always remembered the paternal precept.' (Spohr 1865, vol.1, pp.3-4)

The young Spohr wanted to be a musician but there was disagreement in the family about this. Dr Spohr sympathised with his son's ambitions but knew that an artist's life was not an easy one; Louis would need great determination and application. Therefore the father set Louis a radical test. He sent the 15-year-old to Hamburg with his violin and letters of introduction to make his fame and fortune as a concert artist. But Dr Spohr's Hamburg friend to whom Louis had been sent pointed out that it was the wrong time of the year for concerts as everyone who mattered was out of town. He persuaded Louis to go back home but the youngster now showed the determination and application his father had hoped for. Instead of returning as a failure, he waylaid Duke Carl Wilhelm Ferdinand of Brunswick with a request to be allowed to join the ducal orchestra. The move turned out a success and Spohr had his foot on the first step of the ladder which took him to the top of the musical world. He had passed his father's test.

Dr Spohr had expected that Louis would rise to the sort of challenge which was demanded of someone who wished to be an artist. As we have seen, Louis Spohr continued to rise to challenges throughout his career.

### **Literature**

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