

# GOETHE, ZELTER AND SPOHR

by Peter Skrine

**O**N 16th December 1825 Zelter wrote to Goethe about a new translation of *Macbeth* by the Prussian royal librarian, Dr. Samuel Heinrich Spiker (1786-1858), which had been given its first performance in Berlin the previous day with an overture and stage music by Spohr and entr'actes by Peter von Lindpaintner:

*The performance lasted nearly four hours, one hour or so being taken up by the entr'actes ... but the audience entered and left the theatre with little more than a frisson at all the supernatural goings-on. What was particularly striking was an overture specially composed for the occasion, together with choruses and dances for the witches. The composer (Kapellmeister Spohr of Kassel) is a skilful man, and if it hadn't all been too much of a good thing, everything might have been better. The intention was laudable in itself, because if you happen to have an orchestra to hand it might just as well play something appropriate. But what is appropriate is quite another matter. There is no need for anyone to paint the night black — and that may be the root of the problem. The play itself is rough company and requires a rough-hewn style. But this was lacking, so we were only too happy when the murderers resumed their dastardly deeds on stage. Bits and pieces selected from the latest cookery books — in short, a so-called chamber style — just won't work here; daubing it with colour won't help either: the drama unfolds at its own pace; even Birnam Wood has to play its part, and all those lovely crotchetts and quavers are left lying by the wayside.'*

Zelter then goes on to describe earlier impressions of *Macbeth* which he had never forgotten:

*'Admittedly, in those days we accepted things more easily, and Shakespeare's plays shattered us young fellows and made the sparks fly; back in those days things were not so sentimentalised and sugary. We enjoyed what was healthy, and simply assumed that it had to be as it was because it couldn't possibly be different; whereas now they tell this old fogey that it can indeed be different because that's what it is. The start should come last, the top should come bottom; the straight should be crooked and everything should be drawn out to such an extent that not only is it unrecognisable but that is what it ought to be; in the process our dear public hungrily devours cat served up as rabbit, and finds it quite delicious. But nobody knows better than I that you understand these things better than I do.'*

Zelter's opinion seems to have been widely shared by the Berlin critics of the day: Spiker's version of *Macbeth* flopped, and the music commissioned for it by Count von Brühl, the Generalintendant of the Berlin royal theatres, was not enough to save it<sup>1</sup>.

It was the fate that has tended to befall most incidental music written expressly for the theatre. Either the play for which it is written fails to hold the stage and brings the music down with it, or the play continues on its triumphant course to ever new productions, leaving behind the music written for it at one particular time as producers pursue their search for something more up-to-date.

Similar fates have befallen incidental music which in its day enjoyed far greater fame and critical acclaim, such as that written for Goethe's *Faust* by Prince Anton Heinrich Radziwill (1775-1833), the brother-in-law of Louis Ferdinand, the musical Prussian Prince who entertained Spohr in Berlin in 1805. Outside Weimar itself, Prince Radziwill's music for *Faust* held its own until well into the second half of the nineteenth century, then sank virtually without trace, while of Spohr's music for *Macbeth*, all that survives accessibly today is the overture (Op.75).

Yet in his text for the CPO CD entitled *Louis Spohr: Overtures*, performed by the Rundfunk-Symphonieorchester Berlin under Christian Fröhlich, Dietrich Greiner writes 'From

our viewpoint today, its musical inventiveness and its masterly craftsmanship make it one of the outstanding works of Spohr and of the early romantics'.

The story of Spohr's incidental music to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* – now classified as Op.75 (the overture) and WoO.55 (the other items)<sup>2</sup> – is told by Hans Joachim Schaefer, Chefdramaturg of the Kassel theatre from 1959 to 1989 and President of the city's Goethe Society from 1961 to 1981, in the lecture he was invited to give in Kassel in February 1997<sup>3</sup>. This lecture has now appeared in print, and rightly so, for it is a remarkably informative and stimulating contribution to our knowledge of the musical side of Goethe's wellnigh universal genius. Schaefer also quotes Zelter's equally vivid report to Goethe on the Berlin production of Spohr's opera, *Faust*, in November 1829 (pp.40-42)<sup>4</sup>, but makes no mention of the more general question of the music specifically written for Goethe's works during his own lifetime. This is a pity for though attention has frequently been given to the major operas based on works by Goethe, little has been said about the incidental music written for his plays during his lifetime and later.

During the latter part of his long creative life Carl Friedrich Zelter was Goethe's principal musical friend and correspondent. The two men first met in 1799. They were close in outlook and relatively close in age: Goethe, born in August 1749, was nearly ten years older than Zelter, who was born in December 1758, but the younger man survived the elder by less than two months. Both died in 1832, on 22nd March and 15th May respectively. By then much of the music Prince Radziwill wrote for *Faust* had been performed by Zelter's Singakademie in Berlin before its publication in 1835. Nor was he the only composer to write incidental music for Goethe's masterpiece. Indeed for much of the nineteenth century it was normal practice in Weimar, the city most closely associated with Goethe, to play the incidental music written for *Faust* over a period of time by Carl Eberwein (1786-1868). Appointed director of music at the Weimar Court Theatre in 1826, a post he held until 1849, Eberwein wrote a number of entr'actes for *Faust Part I* between 1816 and 1829, and, went on to write music for Act III of *Faust Part II* after Goethe's death in 1832<sup>5</sup>.

Although Spohr does not mention him in his autobiography, Carl Eberwein was his close contemporary and was more fortunate than his Kassel counterpart in that he enjoyed the encouragement and even the collaboration of Goethe, Germany's greatest living author, and the good working climate which that brought him: it was a far cry from the servitude Spohr had to endure in the service of the Elector of Hesse in Kassel. He entered Goethe's circle in 1807 at the age of 21, and soon succeeded Rudolf Karl Hess as the man in charge of the 'Hausmusiken', the musical activities in Goethe's home. Goethe clearly thought that young Eberwein possessed musical promise, so to equip him for his immediate duties and potential career he arranged for him to travel to Berlin that year and again in 1809 to further his musical education by taking violin and composition lessons from his eminent friend. Eberwein rose rapidly up the ranks of Weimar's musical world as a member and then as director of the Hofkapelle or the court orchestra of Goethe's friend and patron, Duke Carl August of Weimar<sup>6</sup>.

Meanwhile Goethe, aware that Weimar's musical life was rather on the dull side, decided in 1807 to do something to remedy the situation by creating a 'kleine Singanstalt' or 'capella' of his own. This was a voluntary group of professional musicians and amateurs, which rehearsed on Thursdays and gave regular Sunday concerts from the autumn of 1807 until 1816 for the poet, his family and friends, and invited guests. Goethe described it as but a pale reflection of Zelter's famous Singakademie in Berlin in a letter quoted by Schaefer to his Berlin friend dated 27th July 1807, but it had its own accompanist/director at the keyboard or on the guitar, in the person of young Eberwein, while his wife, Henriette Eberwein, née Hässler, took solo parts: she is said to have had a fine soprano voice and to have been an acclaimed Zerlina and Pamina in two of

Goethe's favourite operas. If larger forces were required, the poet's little musical establishment could draw on members of the grand-ducal orchestra. Sometimes Goethe also played an active part himself, as Schaefer tells us:

*'From time to time Goethe would join the basses in his little choir, or, as Carl Eberwein recorded, "would take over the reins himself, deciding/setting the tempi and directing the performance. As a result the singing took on an accuracy of expression and a variety of performance which took listeners by surprise and filled them with wonderment."'* (p.29)

Eberwein and his eminent employer also worked together on their programmes, and in doing so followed the artistic policy of Zelter in Berlin. Their priorities were, Goethe said, 'pleasure and progress at one and the same time', the aim being to provide audiences with a broader experience of the music of different periods and a deeper knowledge of it. The concerts they organised were divided into three sections. The first concentrated on sacred vocal music — motets, cantatas and the like; the middle section focused on technically demanding vocal pieces, including contemporary works, while the third provided light relief in the form of humorous glees, canons and part-songs. The items were not all vocal, however; solo works for piano or guitar were also performed, as were quartets and quintets. The repertoire was thus remarkably wide. Schaefer tells us, for instance, that Goethe's vocal ensemble performed songs and partsongs by Zelter, motets by Haydn, and sacred choral works by composers such as Palestrina, Morales, Marcello, Jommelli, Salieri and Fasch<sup>7</sup>, and of course music by Goethe's own favourite, the incomparable Mozart. They even gave a public performance of selections from Handel's *Messiah*.

Singing was central to music-making in Goethe's home. Emphasis was laid on the vocal heritage of the past, but contemporary music was not overlooked. This is hardly surprising as Goethe's own poetry was already attracting the attention of musicians. Of these Zelter was his favourite and the one who, to his mind, best captured the essence of what he was saying<sup>8</sup>. Throughout this most musical decade in his long life, Goethe relied on his advice and encouragement. And Zelter appreciated what his Weimar friend was doing. While he was rehearsing the Mozart *Requiem* for a performance in Berlin in April 1815 he wrote to his Weimar friend: 'I only wish I could have both you and Mozart in my audience!'

The fascinating details of musical life in Goethe's Weimar touched on by Hans Joachim Schaefer bring home a vital dimension of the aesthetic culture of what was becoming known as the Athens of Germany. Curiously enough it happens to be an aspect grossly neglected by literary scholars. This is why there is all the more reason to be glad that in his lecture to the Kassel Goethe Society Schaefer chose to concentrate on Goethe's long, close and rewarding friendship with Zelter. In those far-off days of coach and carriage travel, Weimar and Berlin were a good deal further apart than they are today; nevertheless Zelter paid Goethe frequent visits, travelling to Weimar fifteen times between 1802 and 1832, by when his total time there amounted to some twenty weeks.

Between these visits their correspondence flourished. Zelter reported to Goethe on the musical and theatrical life of the Prussian capital during a period which gave it its characteristic profile: orderly, chaste, yet immensely impressive. Zelter was a pivot of its musical life. Created Professor of Music at the Berlin Academy of Arts in 1809, he taught many famous musicians including Mendelssohn and his sister, Fanny, Carl Loewe, the composer and performer of many a fine ballad and part-song, Otto Nicolai, who recreated the *Merry Wives of Windsor* for the German musical stage, and Meyerbeer, the creator of operas which, seen through Wagnerian eyes, vulgarised Hegelian antinomies to entertain affluent audiences. Zelter, for his part, remained an admirer of Renaissance polyphony and the polyphony of Bach, and an exponent of the strophic song whose primary purpose was to set a poem to music that captures the essence

of what the poet is saying . Composers, he insisted, should know the ins and outs of their trade before embarking on their often precarious careers. After all, he was himself the son of a stonemason and a mason himself who expanded the workforce of his family firm to 54 men, purchased a brick and tile yard to complement it, and handed it on as a going concern to his eldest son in 1809 when he was appointed to his Chair at the Berlin Academy. Thus he may be said to have contributed to the building of Berlin's reputation in more ways than one. No wonder Goethe consulted him when he installed new heating in his Weimar home.

Zelter's contribution to the creation of Berlin's reputation as a power-house of German music was due, Schaefer tells us, to his forthright personality and his skill in handling gifted young people. One example he cites is Franz Hauser, a young bass who sang in the Court Theatre at Kassel from 1821 to 1825, when it was under Spohr's direction, and who later kept up an interesting correspondence with another of Spohr's pupils, namely Moritz Hauptmann, J.S. Bach's early Victorian successor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig. But Zelter's presence is a good deal more pervasive than that.

As it happens, shortly after the British Spohr Society received Schaefer's informative and very readable study of Goethe's friendship with him, a new CD was produced earlier this year by Derek McCulloch of the University of Surrey at Guildford. As much at home in music as he is in German Studies, McCulloch has published interesting musicological research in the period under discussion here and has now also come up with a delightful CD which sets out to recreate the mood and the sound of a song recital in the 'Haus am Frauenplan', Goethe's famous residence in Weimar. This does not mean that all twenty-four of the songs performed here are actually known to have been sung there; what holds them together are the sound quality of this performance and the fact that all but four are settings of texts by Goethe.

All but three are accompanied on the guitar, which, as we have seen, was one of the two usual accompanying instruments in Carl Eberwein's day. The limpid sound of guitar and voices evokes the crystal-clear atmosphere of the place, its delightful garden, and the pale simplicity of the rooms in which Goethe wrote and entertained, such as the 'Junozimmer' with its colossal bust of the goddess and the grand piano on which Zelter, the young Felix Mendelssohn and Clara Wieck all played. Zelter is represented by his light-hearted 'Ich wollt' ich wär ein Fisch', for soprano, tenor, pianoforte and guitar, and 'Der junge Jäger' a duet for baritone and tenor, while Rudolf Zumsteeg (1760-1802) provides two interesting examples of a genre in which, as in incidental music, theatre and music meet: the dramatic song, represented here by settings of Joan of Arc's farewell to her peasant home from the Prologue to Schiller's play *The Maid of Orleans*, first performed on 18th September 1801, and Mary's soliloquy from Act III of *Maria Stuart*, which was premiered on 14th June 1800.

The other songs on this CD are by composers whose names are less familiar. The Eberwein among them is Carl's elder brother, Traugott Maximilian (1775-1831), who spent his entire creative life in the service of the ruler of the neighbouring principality of Rudolstadt and composed operatic works based on Goethe<sup>9</sup>. Of the other sixteen minor song composers represented, one at least brings us, albeit indirectly, back to Spohr. This is Friedrich Methfessel (1771-1807), represented here by settings of Schiller's 'Das Mädchen aus der Fremde' and of Goethe's 'Der Rattenfänger' and 'Der Erlkönig', an interesting forerunner of the settings by Schubert, Loewe and of course Spohr himself.

Albert Gottlieb (1785-1869), Friedrich's younger brother, is the Methfessel who makes a colourful appearance in Spohr's autobiography (I, 158) when, in the spring of 1819, worn out by a long winter of hard work in Frankfurt, Spohr seized the opportunity which offered itself when four of his old musical friends from Rudolstadt turned up and invited him to join them for a

happy week walking along the Bergstrasse, the picturesque highway which runs along the hills on the east side of the Rhine Valley from Darmstadt to Mannheim, where a musical festival was to take place. This is preromantic Germany, a country whose many political and social problems during the early nineteenth century were offset by an extraordinary upsurge of artistic creativity and *joie de vivre*. Though often threatened by melancholy, this wells up in the songs of these minor composers. Sung here with exactly the right blend of professionalism and pleasure, they cannot fail to delight and charm the listener to this CD of 'Goethe and the Guitar'.

#### Notes

1. Walter Ederer, 'Louis Spohrs Besuche in Berlin', in *Louis Spohr: Festschrift und Ausstellungs-katalog zum 200. Geburtstag* (Kassel: Wenderoth, 1984), pp.65-90 (here pp.78-79).
2. The autograph of Spohr's complete incidental music is in the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Berlin. Apart from the overture, it consists of five very short items of only a few bars each plus a 44-bar banquet scene, the Porter's song (38 bars) and a 182-bar complex involving Hecate, the three witches and Macbeth which includes a 25-bar witches's dance. The overture was published by Peters in 1827 in parts along with arrangements for piano solo and piano four hands.
3. Hans Joachim Schaefer, *Goethes Freundschaft mit Carl Friedrich Zelter* (Kassel: Wenderoth, 1999). A copy of Dr Schaefer's book has kindly been sent to the Spohr Society of Great Britain by the Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft in Kassel. It forms the basis for this essay.
4. See Peter Skrine, 'The Berlin première of *Faust*', Spohr Journal 21, 1994, pp.7-9.
5. Act III was first performed in isolation in Weimar in 1849 to mark the centenary of Goethe's birth. *Faust Part II* was not performed in its entirety until 1854.
6. Eberwein was appointed Kammermusiker in 1810; he was also the director of music at the city's main church, a teacher of singing, and from 1826 the musical director of the Court Theatre, a post which must have brought him into close contact with Hummel, appointed Court Kapellmeister at Weimar in 1820.
7. Schaefer does not specify which Fasch; it could have been either Johann Friedrich or his son, Carl Friedrich Christian, famous for his complicated canons and Zelter's precursor at the Berlin Singakademie which he founded. Zelter published a *Life of C.F.C. Fasch* in 1801.
8. Schaefer makes the points that Goethe was easily over-excited and overcome by music, and suggests that this is why he seems to have closed his ears to Schubert's highly emotive settings of his poems. (P.48)
9. See Philip Bone, *Guitar and Mandolin* (1914; enlarged edition, 1954, pp.258-259).