

A VISIT TO SPOHR IN 1825

from the memoirs of Sir George Smart

Introduction

IN 1907 *Leaves from the Journals of Sir George Smart* by H. Bertram Cox and C. L. E. Cox was published in London by Longmans, Green, and Co. H. Bertram Cox explained in the preface that although 40 years had elapsed since Sir George died at the great age of ninety-one years, the delay was not the fault of the editors. He said: 'Sir George Smart had some objections to the idea of his biography being written, and this feeling was shared by his wife, by his only daughter, Margaret Rose Smart, and by his niece, Ann Caroline Smart, who lived in his family from the time when Margaret was six years of age. It was not until 1891 that the daughter expressed a wish that the journals kept by her father should be considered with a view to their publication in whole or in part ... its completion has been long delayed by the pressure of other occupations.'

Sir George Smart (1776-1867) was born in a London music shop and in 1783 became a chorister in the Chapel Royal. He then held a number of organ posts, was a piano pupil of Johann Baptist Cramer and made his public debut in 1790 when he played a Piano Concerto by Dussek. In 1794 he played the violin and viola for Haydn's Salomon concerts and the following year was a bass singer in the chorus at the Italian Opera House in the Haymarket. Smart learnt to conduct at 'The Concerts of Antient Music' in 1796-97. Gradually he became an important figure in London musical life and was knighted in 1811.

By this time Sir George was a Beethoven enthusiast and gave the first performance in London of the *Battle Symphony or Wellington's Victory* at Drury Lane Theatre on February 10, 1815. He was now in correspondence with Beethoven over the sale of his works to the London Philharmonic Society and it was in order to try to establish the correct tempo for Beethoven's symphonies that Sir George set out to visit Vienna in 1825. He made the trip a wide-ranging one, including visits to Winter in Mannheim, Weber in Dresden, the Mendelssohns in Berlin and Spohr in Kassel (spelt Cassel by Sir George which was the style until the German spelling reform of the 1920s) as well as many more musicians in other cities.

Sir George was closely involved in Weber's visit to England in 1826, the composer staying at his house and in fact it was Sir George who discovered him dead in bed on the morning of June 5. Sir George was chosen to play the organ at the funeral of George IV in 1830 and again at the funeral of William IV in 1837. In 1845 he was a guest of honour at the unveiling of the Beethoven statue in Bonn. Sir George's memoirs include a detailed account of his visit there and further encounters with Spohr who, along with Liszt, conducted the major concerts.

The extracts from Chapter XII

On Tuesday, November 1st, I left Hanover at seven o'clock in the morning, in a voiturier's carriage with Frederick Baumgart. In the kingdom of Hanover we passed through Brüggen, — where we had a tolerable meat breakfast at the post-house while a most excellent violin and tolerable harp played in the hall, — Einbeck and Northeim, where we had supper and rested from twelve o'clock, midnight.

On Wednesday, November 2nd, we started again at four in the morning and passed Göttingen, where is supposed to be the largest university in Germany. We drove through the chief street which has excellent side pavements like London. The college is, I believe, opposite the fountain. The Dukes of York, Kent and Clarence, if not more of the Royal Family, went to this university.

concealed by the trees as is also the theatre. On the left of the château is seen the ruins of a castle and the château, or castle, of Löwenburg, built by the last Elector, who is buried in the chapel there and who often lived in this house which is built in imitation of the old style and has very old furniture in it. Beyond the château you get a view of an aqueduct and of the great figure of Hercules on the top of Winterhausen. We mounted in all nine hundred steps in order to take a peep through the legs of this Hercules, at a tremendous height and with the wind roaring, much to the discomfort of Frederick, whom I had taken with me. You mount by steps on each side of the cascade, which for money they will set playing. About three quarters of the way up we saw the room in which Jerome Buonaparte used frequently to dine. It seems that Cassel was not despoiled when the French were here. It costs the Elector a large sum of money annually to keep Mr Hercules and his house in repair. It is an extraordinary thing, and the *jets d'eau* are doubtless very fine; but it is a pity so much money was expended in erecting this affair, which was put up by the great-great-grandfather of the present elector. We returned about half-past twelve well pleased with the trip the weather being fine and so much walking good for the health.

After table-d'hôte I took a long walk about the old part of the town near the bridge, thence making my way to the orangery buildings below the new gate, passing the foundations of what I understood was to have been a palace, the former one having been burnt. Many convicts were at work wearing their chains on their legs and guarded by soldiers. They were employed in breaking stones, clearing rubbish, etc.

At a little before six I went to the concert of François Schalk, the basset-horn player. It began soon after six o'clock as soon as the Electress entered, she came with her daughter. A chamberlain, as Spohr called him, did the honours to this lady; he had on a blue coat with a red collar and wore a star and boots. He seemed to speak to everybody and among the rest he addressed me. The Electress sat in front with her daughter, the ladies-in-waiting sat behind her, she is the King of Prussia's sister. The room, which is a ball-room, was not large or very lofty. About two hundred persons were present, who paid at the most sixteen groschen a ticket, which is about two shillings English. There were many free tickets, mine among the rest, but supposing all paid the profit would have been about twenty pounds, English money, so Spohr said. Many of the best of the band were engaged at a ball given by the favourite Countess of the Elector. However, the band was good enough for the music played. I was pleased to see the Electress speak to Mr Wild between the acts. Spohr made her a low bow as he left me to conduct the vocal pieces. The first piece was an overture which was poor stuff. The second, poor music, was a *pot-pourri* for the basset-horn. His tone was not bad but he played out of tune. Then followed an aria by Raimondi, sung by M. Wild. He sang well but has a thick utterance; he is accounted the best tenor singer in Germany and probably with truth, for he really sang well. He quarrelled with the Duke of Hesse Darmstadt because, being accustomed to sing certain words to one of Gluck's operas, he would not change them at his desire. Spohr introduced me to him after he had sung. He speaks French and was very polite. In figure he is like Braham and perhaps even like Kean but not quite so tall and certainly not so fat. Spohr says he is about thirty-three years of age. The fourth piece consisted of variations for the basset horn. It was as bad as number two. Then came about a quarter of an hour's stop but no refreshments. The company indeed seemed to want their dresses refreshed. They were a dirty set, the men in boots, great coats and cloaks, the ladies in bonnets. The Electress was tolerably dressed and there were about eight or nine officers present in blue uniform. The second part commenced with an overture to *The Uniform*, so Spohr said, by Voigt, which was just like the first overture. Spohr said that these overtures, being act tunes at the theatre, were chosen on purpose, the band being weak and having had no rehearsal. He disapproved altogether of the concert, Schalk, he said, being a quack. The next piece was an aria

by Winter, sung by Madame Schweizer, of the theatre here, with violin obbligato, played by Mr Weile. After a violin solo and adagio came a recitative and aria in Italian for the voice, with variations alternately for voice and violin, some of which were too difficult for both parties, but the violin was better than the lady; nevertheless I believe she once or twice touched F# in alt and very often D. The violin part Spohr said was arranged by Molique of Munich. The lady "bolted" her notes and is but second rate. Spohr told me that Winter died two days after the king of Bavaria. The Duke of Cambridge had previously told me of his death. The third and fourth pieces in the second part were blended together. They consisted of the Schweizer *Ranz des Vaches* with echo, dreadful stuff, as was also the Polonaise.

The concert was over at twenty minutes to eight. In the two-voice pieces only, Spohr beat time in front with a short stick. The pitch was a comma above my fork. I walked part of the way home with Mr and Mrs Spohr and their two daughters, one of whom, the youngest I believe, is promised in marriage. He told me that the double basses with four strings are tuned the reverse of the violins, that is, the lowest string is E, then A, D and G. At Vienna they formerly had five strings. Spohr says that during the winter there are six subscription concerts in the theatre, when an orchestra is erected on the stage and the whole of the band play. These concerts make those of the occasional strangers who come ineffective unless they are persons of great talent like Hummel, who had a good concert here.

I was obliged to take a *carte de sûreté* for permission to remain in this *great city*, for which I paid six groschen by Frederick.

Saturday, November 5th. — I went with Frederick this morning to bargain with a voiturier to take us to Coblenz. He asked twenty-eight Prussian crowns, including trinkgeld, and we are to set out on Sunday night at ten and arrive at Coblenz on Wednesday morning between ten and twelve.

Spohr met me at the door of the theatre at ten, in his little black cap, and took me to hear the rehearsal of *Jean de Paris*, which was over at a quarter before twelve. It was a very orderly rehearsal. After it ended he took me to the director of the posts in the post-office. I determined to set out on Monday morning at five by the extra post on their advice, and particularly after my conversation with the Wagen-meister, who promised to send on a Laufzettel, a sort of express paper, that good carriages and horses might be ready at Giessen.

At table-d'hôte M. Schalk, who had previously given Frederick his card for me, tried very hard to get recommendations from me to England. From here he goes to Frankfort. After dinner I obtained my passport, which was viséd at the police-office and cost two more groschen, then I went to change some money at Levy Feidel's bank. The young clerk was civil though very inquisitive as to my route and my arrangements.

I bought of the waiter of the inn a ticket for the locked seats before the orchestra. I gave him sixteen groschen for it but it being a subscription ticket doubtless he gained upon it. I then walked with Frederick to see a marble bath, the outside was quite enough to satisfy me. He being determined that every town shall have old sights often points out things not worth looking at. I bought a picture of Spohr and one of Wild.

In the evening I went to the theatre to see *Hausfrieden*, by Iffland, who, Spohr says, has always coffee-drinking in his pieces. There was only one short song in it, a mere nothing, accompanied by the lady with an alto voice or some other lady, without band, on a very bad square pianoforte. Spohr came in and sat near me at the end of the first act and explained something of the plot. Herr Henckel, from Brunswick, was the star of the evening, he is a good demi-comic actor. There was no attempt to call for him at the end — perhaps it is not the custom here. Herr Mustenburg acted well in an old man's comic part, he was very curiously dressed in the fourth act. Madame

Haser was a capital old maid.

Sunday, November 6th. – At a quarter before nine I went to Spohr and by mistake I arrived an hour too soon, however, this gave me an opportunity of trying a clever song of Hauptmann. He played in Spohr's double quartette and in his manuscript overture and music in *Macbeth*, which was written for Berlin by the desire of Count Bruhl. I also gained an explanation of the characters in *Der Berggeist*. M. Schalk came in to take leave of Spohr. At ten we went to a room to hear a performance of Spohr's double quartette, which he kindly arranged for me to hear. The performers were placed thus:—

Principals

Second Violin. Viola.
1st Violin opposite Violoncello

Ripienos

Viola. Second Violin.
Violoncello opposite 1st Violin

Audience

The quartette took twenty-eight minutes, counting a repeat of the second part of the first movement in consequence of a mistake by the principal second violin, and also counting plenty of tuning between each movement. The effect was good. Spohr played beautifully. It is very difficult for the four principal instruments. The principal 'cello was good but too loud. A Countess was present who was a great amateur and whose husband is master of the household, also four or five persons belonging to the band. After this was over I hoped to have heard the band in the courtyard of the Duchess but the Elector ordered them not to play the weather being bad fearing that the rain might spoil their best instruments and silver and gold trumpets. Besides this the troops were fatigued by defiling before his window while he was peeping out. We saw the horse, foot, and artillery with their three bands. This is a most martial town. I had a very good and pleasant dinner at Spohr's. There were present Mr and Mrs Spohr, who says she likes English manners, two grown-up daughters, and one aged seven who was rather troublesome. He had two sons but they are dead. The second daughter is betrothed to a gentleman, an architect I believe, who was present as also was his sister. Before and after dinner we worked away at *Berggeist*. Mrs Spohr tried to play the overture with me but it was too much for her. The eldest daughter sung most of the airs, she has a strong voice but wants manner. Spohr has a famous rough bass voice. I had a tight job with the music which appears fine but is very difficult. I cannot judge properly of it till I hear it in the orchestra. I saw the score about to be sent off to Johanning in London, the price is twenty-five – old – louis, about twenty-five pounds English. Spohr says he was born in Brunswick and has travelled greatly but means to stay at Cassel. His salary is two thousand crowns. We, that is the second Miss Spohr with her intended, Spohr, in his spencer, and I, all walked in the rain to the theatre to hear *Jean de Paris* by Boieldieu, before which was played, by desire of the Elector to please his uncle, a grand march by Spohr in which he said a national air was introduced, but which, except it was a 6/8 passage, I could not make out. This march I do not conceive as being worthy of his talents. This is nothing striking in the music of *Jean de Paris*. Wild certainly sings and acts well, but has he voice enough for a large theatre? The lame princess was played by Fräulein Schweizer, who has a most horrible half note bursting out. The page's part was taken by Fräulein Roland, who has a pretty little voice. She sang the troubadour song and her part in the first duet in the second act well. Spohr says she is an excellent soubrette. The dancing in this opera was most clumsy, girls in men's parts – shocking! There was no opportunity for the choruses to display. The band was excellent. Spohr beat time, he did not use his violin when conducting. He says there are three bassi and five 'celli one of whom was absent ill. The round tail-piece to his violin is good but clumsy.

(On Monday, November 7, Sir George noted that he left Cassel at a quarter past five in the morning).