

SPOHR'S MOST GIFTED PUPIL: NORBERT BURGMÜLLER

by Yutaka Igarashi and Peter Skrine

Note: Yutaka Igarashi provided the bibliographical details and introductory comments while Peter Skrine was responsible for the biographical material, including translation from German originals.

AMONG Spohr's many composition pupils three of the most promising talents died young: Carl Friedrich Curschmann (1805-1841), Hugo Staehle (1826-1848) and Norbert Burgmüller (1810-1836) of whom it was probably Burgmüller who was the most gifted. It is certainly Burgmüller whose music has aroused the greatest interest in our own time. The majority of his works have been published in Germany in the last few years and I already have many of these editions to hand. I am also looking forward to the score of his Piano Concerto from Rasmus Verlag which was conducted by Spohr at the first performance which was in Kassel on January 14, 1829.

We can hear the strong effect Spohr had especially on Burgmüller's string quartets and orchestral works. So it might be of interest to Spohr enthusiasts to own these and compare them with Spohr's works.

August Joseph Norbert Burgmüller was born on February 8, 1810, the third and youngest son of Friedrich August Burgmüller, Düsseldorf's director of music and founder of the well-known Lower Rhine Music Festival. After his father's death in 1824 he moved to Kassel in the autumn of 1825. Soon he was joining in Spohr's concerts and writing his first extant work, his D minor string quartet, Op.4. He also fell in love with an opera singer called Sophie Roland and wrote some of his songs for her.

Then, in 1827, he began a three-year period of musical tuition with Spohr himself as well as theory with Spohr's colleague Moritz Hauptmann, funded by his aristocratic patron, Count Franz von Nesselrode-Ehreshoven, to whom he dedicated his Piano Concerto. Then, in 1830, the 20-year-old Burgmüller bade farewell to Kassel and Sophie Roland, returning to live with his widowed mother in Düsseldorf.

Despite clear symptoms of epilepsy he started work on his First Symphony and got a temporary post as chorus-master at the German Theatre in London in 1831. Although his hopes of succeeding his late father as music director in Düsseldorf came to nothing, 1834 provided the highlight of his career with the première of his symphony on November 13 by the Düsseldorf Orchestra conducted by Mendelssohn, the man who had got his father's old job.

Burgmüller's career was taking off at last. He got on well with Mendelssohn and with many of the artists working at Düsseldorf's famous academy as well as with writers attracted to the city's theatre, then enjoying a golden period under the direction of Carl Immermann. One of them, Wolfgang Müller von Königswinter, even wrote a biography of him entitled *Reminiscences of Norbert Burgmüller*.

When Mendelssohn left Düsseldorf in 1835 to take up his appointment at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Burgmüller applied for his post but once again failed to get it, Julius Rietz being preferred; then the Düsseldorf Musical Society's projected concert of his works failed to take place.

Things were starting to go wrong. He worked at a Second Symphony, hoped in vain to join his pianist brother, Johann Friedrich Franz (1806-1874), in Paris, and sank into ever-increasing depression and ill-health. Shortly before his death he said he felt himself to be a stranger even in his home town, a feeling which found expression in the songs he wrote in a surge of creative activity rapidly undermined by his worsening physical and mental health.

Burgmüller died at Aachen on May 7, 1836, where he had gone to take the waters in an attempt to improve his condition. The details involving his death from drowning have never been adequately explained and it remains an open question as to whether it was suicide, accident or his falling unconscious from an epileptic attack. His funeral in Düsseldorf on May 11, 1836, attracted considerable attention in the city. The young composer's friends wrote glowing obituaries, not least the remarkable avant-garde playwright Christian Dietrich Grabbe (1801-1836) with whom he had much in common, who had recently written an opera libretto for him and who was soon to follow him to an untimely grave on September 7, 1836.

But what counted most was that Mendelssohn wrote a Funeral March in E minor, Op.103, for the occasion. Schumann lamented his death with the words: 'After Franz Schubert's death, no blow could be more grievous than that of Norbert Burgmüller. Fate, instead of decimating the mediocrities crowding around us, has taken from us one of our most commanding young talents. Burgmüller had hardly even enjoyed the first signs of public recognition and was known only to a small circle. It is therefore our duty at the very least to pay him our respects ... His talent had such glowing qualities that only a blind man could doubt that he possessed it.' Also, Schumann's wife, Clara, took his Rhapsody in B minor into her repertoire. At last, on April 2, 1837, a concert of his works was belatedly put on in his native city for his mother's benefit.

One hundred and fifty years after Burgmüller's death, on May 7, 1986, Düsseldorf paid homage to its tragic son when a plaque was unveiled on the house built on the site of the one where he had been born. Alongside the city's civic officers and representatives of its cultural institutions were officials from the International Louis Spohr Society and rightly so in view of the link between the two composers.

Yet Spohr, stronger-willed and more sanguine than Burgmüller, seems to have been unable to understand his plight. To him it seemed a sheer waste of talent. His disappointment with his gifted pupil may well account for the absence of any mention of Norbert Burgmüller in his autobiography.

Information about the modern editions of Burgmüller is as follows:

Work	Publisher's details
Op.1 Piano Concerto in F# minor	Rasmus Verlag (OM006) (in preparation)
Op.2 Symphony No.1 in D minor	Musik Produktion Höflich (Study score 125) 2002
Op.3 Six Songs*	Rasmus Verlag (VM005) 2001 Euro20.00
Op.4 String Quartet No.1 in D minor	Edition Dohr (M-2020-0861-4) 2002 Euro32.80
Op.5 Overture in F minor	Musik Produktion Höflich (in preparation)
Op.6 Five Songs*	Rasmus Verlag (VM005) 2001 Euro20.00
Op.7 String Quartet No.2 in D minor	Edition Dohr (M-2020-0862-1) 2002 Euro34.80
Op.8 Piano Sonata in F minor	Rasmus Verlag (KIM049) 2001 Euro15.00
Op.9 String Quartet No.3 in A♭ major	Edition Dohr (M-2020-0863-8) 2002 Euro32.80
Op.10 Five Songs*	Rasmus Verlag (VM005) 2001 Euro20.00
Op.11 Symphony No.2 in D major	Musik Produktion Höflich (in preparation)
Op.12 Five Songs*	Rasmus Verlag (VM005) 2001 Euro20.00
Op.13 Rhapsodie in B minor*	Rasmus Verlag (KIM054) 2002 Euro25.00

- Op.14 String Quartet No.4 in A minor Edition Dohr (M-2020-0864-6) 2002 Euro34.80
 Op.15 Duo for clarinet & piano in E \flat major Schott 1970
 Op.16 Polonaise in F major* Rasmus Verlag (KIM054) 2002 Euro25.00
 Op.17 Four Entractes for orchestra Musik Produktion Höflich (in preparation)
 (* Op.3, 6, 10 and 12 are in the same volume. Op.13 and 16 are also in one volume.)

More details of these editions can be found on the internet as follows:

Rasmus Verlag: www.rasmusik.de

Musik Produktion Höflich: www.musikmph.de

Edition Dohr: www.dohr.de.

A large proportion of these Burgmüller compositions can also be found in the current record catalogue so that we can not only study his music but listen to it, generally in excellent performances. Record reviewers who have spotted similarities to Schubert in Burgmüller's string quartets are, of course, really listening to Spohr influences but as most of these reviewers are unfamiliar with Spohr, they are unable to make the connection. Anyway, here is information on the CDs currently available:

Discography

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| Op.1 | MDG3350817-2: | L. Hokanson/ Wuppertal SO/G. Schmalfuss |
| | Schwann 317942: | N. Lahusen/Halle Phil. State Orch./H. Beissel |
| Op.2 | CDS1046-2: | Kassel State Theatre Orch./M. Piollet |
| Op.3 | MDGL3244: | M. Shirai/H. Höll (Op.3/1, 3, 4, 5, 6) |
| Op.4 | MDG3360994-2: | Mannheim Quartet |
| Op.5 | MDG3350817-2: | Wuppertal SO/G. Schmalfuss |
| Op.6 | MDGL3244: | M. Shirai/H. Höll (Op.6/1, 2, 4) |
| Op.7 | MDG3360993-2: | Mannheim Quartet |
| Op.9 | MDG3360994-2: | Mannheim Quartet |
| Op.10 | MDGL3244: | M. Shirai/H. Höll (Op.10/1, 5) |
| Op.11 | MDG3350817-2: | Wuppertal SO/G. Schmalfuss |
| Op.12 | MDGL3244: | M. Shirai/H. Höll (Op.12/2, 4) |
| Op.14 | MDG3360993-2: | Mannheim Quartet |
| Op.15 | CDDCA732: | E. Johnson/G. Back |
| | CC0015: | C. Lawson/N. P. Da Costa |
| | CM28002 | K. Leister/F. Bognár |

Without opus MDGL3244: M. Shirai/H. Höll (Frühlingslied)

CD labels: MDG = Dabringhaus und Grimm; CDDCA = ASV; CC = Clarinet Classics; CDS = Sterling; CM = Camerata.

Also, in 1986 an all-Burgmüller LP was released on the German Preciosa Aulos label (PRE68539AUL) featuring the baritone Wolfgang Pailer and the pianist Christian Lambour who played an 1846 Viennese instrument by J.B. Streicher. The contents were the B minor Rhapsody, Op.13, a Waltz in E flat major which is Burgmüller's earliest surviving piano piece, and 18 songs as follows: Op.3/1-6; Op.6/1-5; Op.10/2, 3, 5; Op.12/1, 3, 5; and the posthumous 'Frühlingslied'.