

STERNDALE BENNETT'S VISIT TO SPOHR IN 1842

by Michael Hopf

We continue our policy of reprinting important articles from some of our early Spohr Journals. The one given here originally appeared in two parts in the 1982 and 1983 Journals.

EARLY in 1842, the young English composer, William Sterndale Bennett, set off on an artistic expedition to Germany. One of the prime objects of this journey was to meet the great Spohr at Cassel. As early as 1837, there is evidence that Spohr had heard and taken an interest in Bennett's piano pieces.

Even Schumann, Bennett's friend and mentor, had noticed the influence of Spohr on Bennett's overture *The Wood Nymphs*. Hardly surprising, therefore, that the Englishman should wish to pay his respects in person to the "doyen" of German composers.

Bennett's description of his visit is contained in his journals and personal letters to Mary Wood, later to become his wife. These provide a fascinating picture of musical life in Cassel and, not least, of Spohr himself.

Bennett arrived at Hesse-Cassel on January 5, 1842, after six days of strenuous travel (* * * indicates passages omitted by Sterndale Bennett's son).

[Journal]. "Römischer Kaiser, Hesse-Cassel, 3 o'clock Mittwoch, Jan. 5, 1842. * * * On my arrival here (at 9 a.m.), immediately sent my cards to Spohr, Hauptmann, Madame de Malzburg, and Frank Mori. * * * I received messages from all. * * * Since dinner have paid my visit to Spohr, who has always been represented to me as a cold, haughty person, but whom, I am proud to say, I found quite the reverse.

"He has a very pretty little house all to himself, in a little garden, and as soon as I entered I heard the violin going, but found that it was a pupil playing; he received me very kindly; talked with him about his new Symphony which we are to have at Philharmonic this next season, and other matters. * * *

"Tomorrow I shall hear under his direction *The Templar and the Jewess* of Marschner, though, as he told me, he wished me to hear *Fidelio* which he was to have given, but in consequence of the illness of one of the singers postponed; he received the message to this effect whilst I was with him, and the coolness with which these Germans take these matters perfectly astonishes an Englishman, at least it does me. Now I only want to see Cherubini, and I shall know the only three great men left in our Art, viz. Spohr, Mendelssohn and Cherubini. * * *

"Wednesday night, 11 o'clock. Have been to the concert given by Frank Mori this evening, and met Spohr there, who introduced me to his wife with whom and himself I sat the whole evening. * * * Talked a great deal with Spohr about musical matters, about his Symphony in D minor (which I like better than anything of his) and which he told me he wrote twenty years ago in London. * * *

"Jan. 7th. * * * Went last evening to the theatre, which is a very nice building but like all German theatres very badly lighted. * * * I was in the stalls behind the Orchestra, and between the acts Spohr came and talked to me about the Music and situations of the performers in the Orchestra. The Stringed instruments are all on the one side and the Wind instruments on the

other; the Basses in the centre. I only wish our Wind instruments in England would play as well in tune as they do here. The singing was not good. I wonder our English singers do not learn German and travel, I am sure they would have great success."

On January 8, he wrote to Miss Wood: "There is here a Madame de Malzburg, one of the aristocracy of Hesse-Cassel, who is a great friend of mine, and plays my Sketches by memory and other things, * * * and last evening I made my first appearance in Cassel at a large party in her house.

"Spohr was there and got up one of his double Quartetts for me to hear, he also played one of his single Quartetts. I never heard such playing in my life. He is now nearly sixty years old, but has the greatest energy. I promised him in the morning that I would play and I found the parts of my Caprice in my portmanteau, so I took that and trusted to my memory for the Pianoforte part.

"You would have pitied me if you had seen the curious Pianoforte I had to play on, and had not touched one since I left London. However I knew it was not time to make apologies, and off I started with everybody round the instrument. Something made me *very determined*, and I got through with capital success.

"They would not let me get up from the Pianoforte, and I must now play 'Der See, der Mühlbach, und die Quelle', which is in English 'The Lake, the Millstream and the Fountain'. The young ladies play these little sketches here, and so Spohr said to me: 'They all play them differently, and now you must settle the point'; and then after I had played them, there was a *great uproar*.

"After supper, once more the ladies begged Spohr to ask me to play again, I played them my *Allegro Grazioso* and one of Mrs Anderson's pieces. * * * Altogether it was perhaps the most gratifying time I ever spent in my life, and I only looked round the room for my Mary Wood to make my happiness complete.

"Jan. 9th [letter continued]. * * * I have been received here by the musical people like a Prince; when I go to the theatre Spohr leans over the Orchestra and talks to me as if I were his son. He paid me yesterday his visit at my Hotel but I was unfortunately not at home; he sent me, however, a note, inviting me to tea at his house and afterwards he took me to a Society, or kind of Club of which he is a member, where I found many people smoking pipes and playing cards (in the German fashion). I was obliged also (only imagine) to play *three games of billiards* with him, and had the pleasure of being very well beaten by him, although I managed to win one game.

"I afterwards supped with him at the same place as his guest, and he brought me home again, and in all respects he has behaved to me as if I were really his son. He talks to me about music as if I knew as much about it as he did. * * *

"Tonight I think I shall go and spend the evening at Madame de Malzburg's. * * * Yesterday I found on her pianoforte my three diversions which she played with me uncommonly well. There was also a volume on the pianoforte with Bennett on the back. All these things make me very vain, and I must get back to England to bring me to myself again.

"Jan. 10th [Journal]. Paid my Abschieds-Visit to Spohr this morning and stayed nearly an hour with him. He has behaved all the time I have been here with the *greatest* kindness, *and I won't forget it hastily*. * * * Afterwards went to my favourite Madame de Malzburg, whom I like very much indeed and I never met a more amiable lady in my life. They want me to come back this way and I will if I can. Mr K supped with me this evening and talked about Theory and Counterpoint enough to serve *half-a-dozen* Academies.

"I must not forget to mention that the Austrian Ambassador sent me a most polite message to spend the evening at his house, but I declined as I had to send my luggage to the Post-office and

had no coat to go in. * * * I am now going to bed, and start tomorrow morning at half-past five. I cannot however close this book without a most grateful feeling for the great kindness I have experienced during the few days I have been in Cassel, and I shall always retain the most pleasant recollections of my visit. God save Spohr, Mdme de Malzburg, & & &."

Bennett left Cassel on January 11 for Leipzig to meet again with Schumann.

This account is reproduced from "The Life of Sterndale Bennett" by his son, S. R. Sterndale Bennett, published by the Cambridge University Press in 1907.

William Sterndale Bennett returned to London from his "artistic expedition" to Germany in March 1842. The young composer's meeting with Spohr at Cassel had been remarkably congenial and left him with "the most pleasant recollections".

The following year, 1843, Bennett suggested to the Philharmonic Society (at that time in dire financial straits) that they should write to Spohr inviting him to come over towards the end of the season. Spohr promptly accepted and duly arrived in London in time to attend a glittering soir e arranged by Bennett and attended by such notables as Dreyschock, Hall e, Moscheles and Ernst. Spohr's concerts proved a great success and an extra concert was given by royal command, the Queen herself attending.

Later that year, Spohr willingly gave a testimonial to Bennett who was applying for the Music Professorship at Edinburgh, vacated by the resignation of Sir Henry Bishop. However, Bennett's application failed and Hugo Pierson got the job.

Bennett remained, throughout his life, a strong supporter and admirer of Spohr. He was instrumental in introducing many of Spohr's chamber works (particularly the string quartets) to the English public through his series of Chamber Concerts in the Hanover Square Rooms.

In his "Life of Sterndale Bennett", the composer's son presents his father's estimation of Spohr as a composer. The relevant section is reproduced here:

"Bennett remained, throughout his life, constant in his loyalty to Spohr, always maintaining that the Cassel composer, when at the zenith of his powers, had written music which gave him a right of succession in the dynasty of Great Masters. ... He strongly resented any discussion upon the relative eminence of the great men who had in their turn helped to raise the edifice of Music; so that all there is to say with certainty about his estimate of Spohr is that he placed him in a first class, that class being one within which, in his opinion, no order of merit was feasible.

"He wrote, however, in reference to the great musicians: 'I do not confound genius with mastery'; and he may have valued Spohr for what he called 'mastery' than for what he called 'genius'. He certainly thought him a great master of orchestration, especially admiring him as one who could, when he chose to use his means frugally, lay them out to the best advantage.

"In a lecture at Cambridge, in 1871, after quoting Mozart's G minor Symphony as an example of marvellous power and pathos displayed with sparing use of instruments, he next put forward the score of Spohr's 'Scena Cantante' [i.e. Violin Concerto No.8] as a study of modesty with grandeur. His mention of the two composers in such close sequence, though it only refers to a single trait which he recognised in both, is of itself sufficient to give some notion of his respect for Spohr's mastery.

"But he was no blind hero-worshipper. He did not consider a Great Master outside the pale of reverent criticism, nor did he think that a Master had his genius perpetually within call. One day he had been studying a newly-arrived instalment of the Leipzig edition of Bach's works, and as he gently placed the volume in his book-case he sighed and said, 'Very disappointing'.

"Such a man was not likely to be afflicted with musical manias, and the violent mania raging at one time in this country for Spohr's choral music, and more especially for that which he wrote in his declining years, only affected Bennett in so far that he thought it had done Spohr harm.

When the reaction came, he would say angrily that the English people had got tired of Spohr, because they had only admired his defects.

“It was not, however, the populace alone who were fickle to Spohr. Bennett lived to notice with pain some apostasy among musicians who in earlier days had been the composer’s adherents, and he did not understand turncoats. In one of his letters to Mendelssohn, he asserted of himself that he was never liable to hasty impressions, but that he himself could not forget anything that had once gone to his heart. He was not then referring to music, but his constancy as a musician was very marked, and a particular instance of it may be seen in his attachment to Spohr’s D minor Symphony, the work to which he gave a preference in his Cassel diary. He seized opportunities of reviving it at his own orchestral concerts in London.

“As soon as he became one of the Philharmonic Directors, the Symphony after long neglect immediately reappeared on the Society’s programmes. The same thing happened, many years later, when he was appointed the Society’s conductor. Mr Paul David, who, during the last ten years of Bennett’s life, was intimately acquainted with him, has written of the same Symphony: ‘It was a favourite work of Sterndale Bennett, who was never tired of humming its spirited and melodious themes’. Sir George Grove, when recalling the last occasion on which he had met Bennett, said: ‘He talked to me of Spohr’s Symphony in D minor’.

“In his work as a pianist and pianoforte-teacher, Bennett could not offer the same liege service to Spohr as to other great musicians. It was probably this disability which led him to take every chance of expressing his respect by word of mouth.

“Chary as he was of conversation on musical subjects, whenever Spohr’s name was mentioned in his presence he would always open his lips, and give some token of his fidelity. He certainly kept the promise which he made to himself in Cassel, not to forget *hastily* Spohr’s personal kindness to him.”