

# AN 1834 KASSEL ASSESSMENT OF SPOHR AND HIS OPERATIC RIVALS

by Peter Skrine

IT IS always interesting to see how people responded to what, for them, was modern, indeed contemporary music. In my article on the poets of Spohr's Lieder Op.103 in the Spohr Journal 25 (1998), mention was made of Ernst Koch (1808-58), the author of one of the texts Spohr selected for that album. He was also the author of a highly original, little known nowadays, volume with the curious title *Prinz Rosa-Stramin*.

It was published in 1834, when Koch was in his mid-twenties, and is very much the work of a free spirit smarting in the aftermath of the political events of 1830 in Germany and elsewhere and the repressive treatment of politically active students which followed in reactionary states such as the Electorate of Hesse under Spohr's employer, Wilhelm II.

A young man with a liberal outlook, Koch abandoned the prospect of an academic career in favour of a post as a civil servant in Kassel; it is hardly surprising that he published *Prinz Rosa-Stramin* under the unassuming pseudonym, "Ernst Helmer", which in German ironically suggests an "earnest fellow at the helm".

The last chapter of this appealingly idiosyncratic story by a young music-lover in Kassel evokes a scene in a hostelry to which the narrator and his friend Erasmus repair for a drink after a performance of *Oberon* at the city's theatre. Here they find themselves in the company of a clerk, an inspector, two musicians and a retired major:

"One of the musicians was arguing with the other, who was a devotee of Weber. They had also both just come back from the theatre. 'I admire Rossini,' said the first, 'and his tuneful compositions which transport the listener into paradise' –

" 'And make you believe that heaven is full of triangles and fiddles,' said the other, 'I just do not understand how people can fail to appreciate Weber and Spohr!'

" 'Well, just you tell me what you make of them,' said his colleague.

" 'Or all three, if you wish. Spohr is a conservatory full of tropical plants and intoxicating perfumes. Weber is an English landscape garden in the moonlight, with terraces in full bloom, cascading waterfalls, and rustling plane-trees. In the distance you can hear the sound of hunting horns; a storm blows up, and ethereal elves dance upon the greensward. Rossini is a children's garden, in which pretty primulas, snowdrops and daisies grow.'

"Erasmus interrupted at this point, claiming that the temple of art is a church. 'And in this church,' he continued, 'Spohr is the solemn bell calling the faithful to worship; Weber is the organ that floods the nave and aisles with brilliant sounds, solemn and sweet; and Rossini is ...'

" 'What is Rossini?' they all started asking."

" 'Well, Rossini,' Erasmus answered, 'he's the sidesman with the tinkling bell relieving the worshippers of their money.' "

Koch's light-hearted little musical episode tells us more than the casual reader might think. In the first place it reflects the programmes of German provincial theatres in the early 1830s, and how they were rated by intelligent young people. *Oberon*, which Spohr introduced to Kassel in 1827, had received its première the year before at Covent Garden – as the second musician and Weber devotee neatly suggests by likening it to an English garden. Its appeal is evident but the musician, who has just been playing in the orchestra, speaks like someone introducing the

overture to Weber's opera on Classic FM, whereas Erasmus, a young intellectual in the audience, sees its composer in more sublime terms; he belongs after all to a generation about to come under the sway of Wagner, though Koch could not know this: *The Flying Dutchman* was not premièred until 1843.

Their evaluations of Spohr himself are equally perceptive. Erasmus, for whom Weber clearly comes top, is also able to appreciate the Spohr of the great oratorios which established him in the preeminent position he held in both Britain and Germany during the period of general religious revival in both countries in the early to mid-nineteenth century, whereas the musician, coming straight from the orchestra-pit, knows a different Spohr, namely the composer of *Jessonda*, the opera which he had composed for Kassel and premièred there in 1823 on taking up his appointment<sup>1</sup>.

Its exoticism – evoked by the second musician's talk of “tropical plants and intoxicating perfumes” – was to become a significant feature of opera during the age of nineteenth-century colonial expansion, and was to make it a prototype for *L'Africaine*, *The Pearl Fishers*, *Lakmé* and *Madame Butterfly*.

The opinions voiced by the second musician in this dialogue are more up-to-date than those of his colleague, for whom Rossini comes first. Yet in a way his evaluation is realistic, too. Not only was Rossini to compose his *Petite Messe solennelle* – no-one could guess that in 1834; he also knew how to attract audiences and make an opera a financially viable entertainment for all concerned. Such considerations matter in the commercial theatre. And it was he who first revealed the delights of opera to me as a boy!

#### Note

1. It was on Weber's recommendation that in 1822 Spohr was offered the post of Court Kapellmeister at Kassel which had been offered to but turned down by Weber himself.