

# SPOHR AND THE NAZIS

by Keith Warsop

THE ancestors of Louis Spohr were thoroughly German, healers of souls and bodies; either Lutheran pastors or medical men. Quite why someone with Spohr's racial background should have fallen foul of the Nazis is on the face of it difficult to understand, even allowing for the somewhat confused philosophy of their creed. It would have seemed that Spohr was eminently qualified to be projected as a "pure German artist" in opposition to the "degenerate intellectuals of the Mosaic faith". Dig deeper beneath the surface though, and one can find that everything about Spohr was calculated to cause offence to Hitler's New Order.

While the horrific treatment the Nazis meted out to Jews stands at the forefront of their crimes, they did not draw the line there; Slavs and non-whites also had a lower standing in their theories of racial hierarchy. Not only that but even "true" Germans whose views were opposed to the Nazis came under persecution as, for instance, in their treatment of the future West German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer. Spohr's offences were five-fold; he stood out against the excesses of Prussian militarism and the crushing of democracy in Germany; he numbered Jews among his intimate circle, including a Jewish son-in-law and hence part-Jewish granddaughters; he was a devoted and active Freemason; he promoted love across racial barriers in the plot of his most popular opera *Jessonda*; and, after his death, the promotion of his reputation and much of the financing of the Spohr Gesellschaft (formed October 12, 1908) involved a number of Jews who were still alive as the Third Reich came into being.

Spohr's reputation had suffered a decline towards the close of the 19th century and he was gradually being excluded from lists of the great composers published in music dictionaries. Nevertheless, certain works remained in the repertoire and were accepted as his contribution to the catalogue of musical masterpieces. These included his Seventh, Eighth and Ninth violin concertos, his Fourth Symphony *Die Weihe der Töne*; the opera *Jessonda*; in chamber music the four double quartets, the Nonet and the violin duos; and, in Britain, the oratorio *Die letzten Dinge*.

Until the advent of the Nazis this remained pretty much the position but from January 1933 when Hitler came to power, matters moved with amazing speed. *Jessonda* was banned as its plot went counter to the racial theories of the Nazis – the love affair between a European hero and an Indian princess was anathema to Hitler. Although the Nazis did not directly ban Spohr's other music, the interdict placed on *Jessonda* effectively warned off German musicians from performing any Spohr at all and his works quickly disappeared from the concert life of the Third Reich.

Kassel, the city where Spohr had lived and worked for more than 35 years and where he suffered in his later years from the spiteful and despotic behaviour of the Electoral Prince, was one of the most fanatical strongholds of Nazism. On the infamous Kristallnacht in 1938 when Goebbels incited the population of Germany to despoil Jewish shops and businesses across the country, the loyal burgers of Kassel could not wait for the deadline at which the destruction was timed to begin and launched their outrages well before the hour laid down by the Minister of Propaganda.

So, it is no surprise to discover that in 1934, the year after the foundation of the Third Reich, the pro-Nazi Mayor of Kassel, writing from his office in the recently renamed Adolf Hitler-Straße, ordered the closure and seizure of assets of the Spohr Gesellschaft, a move which was

perhaps deliberately selected to follow close on the rather muted celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Spohr's birth that April. The Mayor gave the motive for these edicts as "political reasons", no doubt because of the Jewish involvement in the Spohr Gesellschaft, and he also ordered the actual destruction of some Spohr materials which had been in the possession of the society. Luckily, some dedicated music librarians in Kassel managed to preserve many of these threatened items of the composer's legacy. Annihilating the Spohr Gesellschaft was just the start; now the Nazis determined to eradicate Spohr's name from the city's history. Kassel's Spohr Conservatory was closed and replaced by the Music Academy; in this they were lastingly successful for even today Spohr's name has not been restored to the city's major musical establishment!

Spohr's Jewish links and *Jessonda* were not the only things to enrage the Nazis. In 1925, Edward Speyer had published a memoir of his father, Wilhelm Speyer, the Lieder composer and Frankfurt banker who had been a great friend of Spohr. The book included extracts from Spohr's letters to Wilhelm Speyer and they revealed the composer's great love of democracy and freedom, his support for the 1848 revolution, and his dismay and scorn for the forces of repression which overturned it, as in this letter: "The cowardice of the Prussian Government has robbed us and the whole of Germany of the freedom we have won, and unfortunately there is no hope that this generation will see a second and, let us hope, successful rising of the German nation. If I were not too old, I would now emigrate to the free country of America." Such comments could not have endeared Spohr to the new militarists of the Nazi regime and Speyer's book appeared close enough to their rise to power for the contents to be noted and placed in their cultural "black list" records.

Both here and in the 1860/61 posthumously published edition of Spohr's Autobiography, his 50 years of dedicated membership of the Freemasons is made clear and, again, this offended the Nazis. After coming to power they banned the Masons whom they accused of being a front organisation for Jewish intrigues.

Martin Wulfhorst has pointed out that a Professor Karl Blessinger, a Nazi cultural politician, received a letter asking whether "one has to consider Spohr, having been a Mason, to have been so much under Jewish influence that one has to strike him from one's memory". Blessinger replied that *Jessonda* was "no longer tolerable because of its subject matter (glorification of racial mixture)." Confusingly, Blessinger then tried to argue that Jewish intrigues had caused the decline in Spohr's reputation yet the reality was that Nazi cultural politics were more to blame while, in contrast, Jews were among the few who still played Spohr!

One can see, therefore, that Spohr's marginal position in the pre-1933 repertoire was totally extinguished by the Third Reich. Even in countries which were opposed to the Nazis, the influence exerted by German musicians began to have an effect and Spohr retained just a toehold in the rest of the Western world where a few violinists, mainly Jewish as we have said, still played his Eighth Violin Concerto, the *Gesangszene*.

Yet why would the all-powerful Nazi Party bother itself with a long-dead, half-forgotten composer? The fact that they did so seems incomprehensible unless we realise that the Nazis wished to control every facet of German life, both past and present, and that their treatment of Spohr was not unique.

Cultural watchdogs, anxious to increase their standing in the party, pried into every corner and hunted down every possible divergence from National Socialist dogma. So some of Handel's oratorios were given new words, removing flattering references to the Israelites; lighter music genres were investigated and approved or otherwise; and the same sort of examination went on in the case of literature and the other arts. The burning of the books and the exhibition of

degenerate art were just two of the more public examples of the desire of the Third Reich to lay down the law on what was acceptable for the German populace. In this context, Spohr was merely an insignificant victim of cultural “politically correct” Nazi behaviour but in relation to the performance and reputation of the composer and his music, his treatment was of major significance.

A foretaste of the Nazis’ reaction to Spohr followed the original publication of his Autobiography when his liberal views and support for the revolution expressed there came to the attention of the Kaiser’s court in Berlin. As a result Spohr’s music was *persona non grata* there during the later years of the 19th century and his sonatas for violin and harp could be played there only when attributed to Gounod. In Kassel itself, Spohr’s own princely employer was also outraged at what appeared in the Autobiography and as a result banned the composer’s old orchestra from playing at a graveside tribute on the 1861 anniversary of his death. Later in Kassel, in the years before the First World War, the city authorities placed many obstacles in the way of attempts by Spohr’s family and supporters to open a worthy museum to his memory though they did succeed in having his name adopted for the Kassel Conservatory.

From the spring of 1945 “proscribed music” could be played again in Germany and those performers whose reputations had been sullied by their proven, or even alleged, connection with the Nazis had to start to rebuild their careers. What better way than by promoting works by those very Jewish composers whose fellows had been so recently herded into the gas chambers? So the likes of Wilhelm Furtwängler, Herbert von Karajan and Karl Böhm were in the forefront of the revival in Germany of the music of Mendelssohn, Mahler and other Jewish composers. However, as mentioned earlier, the Nazis had also turned their wrath on to “pure Aryan” composers like Spohr who failed to meet their perverse standards. But what kudos could Furtwängler and Co. gain by performing Spohr in the immediate post-war years? Whereas with Mendelssohn or Mahler they were making a public statement about their freedom from the taint of Nazism, with Spohr they would merely be playing just another German “Aryan” composer.

It is significant that the few champions of Spohr at this time remained mainly Jewish musicians or ensembles which included Jews. Thus Jascha Heifetz, Gregor Piatigorsky, Yehudi Menuhin, Oscar Shumsky, Emanuel Hurwitz, Eli Goren, the Vienna Octet and the New York-based Fine Arts Quartet were among those honourable artists who did play Spohr. Of course there were Germans, too, who played him but they were in the minority and hardly high-profile performers. In the recording field it is noticeable that Germany’s major company, Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft, waited until 1989 before releasing any substantial Spohr work on its label (the Nonet coupled with Martinů’s Nonet). Earlier, in the 1960s, the non-German harpist Nicanor Zabaleta, it is true, had appeared on DGG LPs featuring Spohr’s two short solo harp works, Op.35 and Op.36. As the Nazis had practically dictated DGG policy from the early 1930s, maintaining representation on its board, it no doubt took many years for their artistic influence to ebb away.

It might be thought that the end of the war and the collapse of the Third Reich would have provided the final paragraph for the story of Spohr and the Nazis. Not so, as there is a sinister coda directly involving the Spohr Society of Great Britain! For among those who survived the war and managed to evade justice were some in whom the fire of the Nazi creed still burned. In Kassel, such people were still to be found for several years yet. Though the musical scholar, Franz Uhlendorff, urged on and supported by the Kassel publisher, Herfried Homburg, reactivated the Spohr Gesellschaft in 1954 as the Louis Spohr Gesellschaft, obstacles were placed in the way of the restoration of the composer’s reputation.

For instance, it took some years before, in the 1960s, the Louis Spohr Gesellschaft were

allowed to use a couple of rooms high up in the city's central Murhardsche Bibliothek und Landesbibliothek. Then, Spohr material confiscated in 1934 and clearly showing the original Spohr Gesellschaft's stamp but now in other collections, failed to be returned to the new, successor organisation. Shamefully, in 2004, that still remains the position and the city of Kassel even now has failed to make full restitution for the treatment of Spohr and his reputation during the Nazi years.

When the Spohr Society of Great Britain was formed in October 1969 with the direct encouragement of Herr Homburg in Kassel, the neo-Nazis emerged from the undergrowth, worried that the plan to make the Louis Spohr Gesellschaft an international body with a British chapter would perhaps give a renewed impetus to the promotion of Spohr's music. The situation was summed up by Maurice Powell, the main founder of the Spohr Society of Great Britain, who addressed the Louis Spohr Gesellschaft's Præsidium in Kassel on October 24th 1970. He told them: "Recent events in Kassel and London have cast a shadow over our work. Untrue rumours – such as, the Spohr Society of Great Britain has only two members – have been circulated, and it seems that certain persons are trying to undermine our confidence and disrupt our activities.

"Some time ago I received a letter in London which I passed on to Mr Homburg. With this letter he was able to expose the people concerned, their lies and their jealousies. I have here in my hand another letter which I received a month ago, pouring scorn on our Spohr Journal. This represents the latest attempt to sabotage our work. Considering the valuable work we are all doing for Spohr in Germany and England, it is very regrettable that events such as these should have occurred.

"One of the main factors which has added to the quality of life in recent years has been the greater understanding between nations. Music, a truly international language, and the many cultural exchanges that are possible today, have played an important role in bringing the peoples of the world closer together. The formation of the International Society has, therefore, even wider significance than the valuable research for Spohr. I appeal to you, on behalf of the members of the Spohr Society of Great Britain, and all those who value democracy, to expose these people who are attempting to belittle our work, so that everyone may know who they are, and how disgraceful and shameful are their intentions."

This brave effort to bring into the open the attempts to maintain and perpetuate the prejudices against Spohr paid off. Though recovery was slow and momentum only began to pick up around the time of the bicentenary year of 1984 we have seen a steady widening of the band of enthusiasts for the music of Louis Spohr whose reputation today stands at a higher level than at any time in the past hundred years or so. But older scholars and critics who had been brought up and trained to repeat parrot-fashion the so-called "weaknesses" and "mannerisms" of Spohr could not so easily shake off such views and approach him afresh. For such well-known figures as Edward J. Dent, Winton Dean and Robert Layton, for example, while they were in no way sympathetic or supportive of neo-Nazi views, it was too late to change their spots and they continued to pour scorn on Spohr's music at each revival, be it *Jessonda*, *Faust*, *Die letzten Dinge*, the double quartets or the concertos and symphonies.

A new generation of critics, however, has arisen such as Clive Brown, Martin Wulfhorst, Hartmut Becker, Wolfram Boder and others who could take a positive but balanced view of Spohr. Their excellent entries on Spohr are forming part of the new editions of standard music dictionaries and it is their opinions from which future music lovers will derive an image of the composer. So these new voices have gradually erased the dead weight of the Nazi period from the composer's reputation. For his support of democracy, liberalism, toleration and musical brotherhood as well as the quality of his best compositions, Spohr deserves no less.