

URELI CORELLI HILL AND SPOHR

compiled by The Editors assisted by John Ahouse

IN 2002 the New York Philharmonic celebrated its 160th anniversary and the occasion was marked by the acquisition of a remarkable collection of musical documents, put together over a period of more than 60 years by Harold Lineback, a resident of St Louis. Its importance lies in the fact that it has much to do with the history of the Philharmonic and one of its major treasures is a 175-page diary kept by Ureli Corelli Hill, the musician who helped to found America's oldest symphony orchestra in 1842.

In the diary Hill documented his first visit to Europe in the mid-1830s which includes a fascinating glimpse of Spohr with whom the American studied in Kassel for nine months from the summer of 1835.

Details about Mr Lineback's collection, Hill's diary and the references to Spohr have appeared in an article entitled "An American Abroad" by Barbara Haws in the November/December 2002 issue of *Symphony*, the American Symphony Orchestra League's bi-monthly magazine and also on its Internet web site at www.symphony.org/news/room/02ndhaws.shtml.

The article, which is by the archivist/historian of the New York Philharmonic, states that Hill was born in Boston in 1802, the son of a music-lover who named another son George Handel Hill. Uri Corelli Hill became an orchestral violinist in New York in the 1820s and he directed the New York premiere of Handel's *Messiah* in 1831. He was also well-known as a concert organiser, teacher and chamber musician.

The diary reveals that Hill and his wife, Lucinda, embarked on a "long contemplated and greatly wished for voyage across the Atlantic to Europe". His travels began from London, then took in Rotterdam to Kassel and Dusseldorf, then back to London followed by a visit to Paris before returning home.

One of Hill's prime objectives in making his journey was to improve his own musicianship. He notes that he "took 46 lessons of Spohr during nine months at one dollar per lesson, and 52 from Moritz Hauptmann".

Hill's description of Spohr is revealing: "Monday August 10. Spohr sent his servant to me appointing 3 o'clock for my first lesson. I attended and play'd him a piece. He play'd an accompaniment on his violin. He told me my left hand was excellent and very just in the intonation. My bow hand was good but my bow required more judicious distribution and it required a little more of a good school. I told him I was aware of it and had come all the way from America for this purpose. ... Spohr look'd upon it as a very novel thing that a person should come from America, such a distance, to him. He seem'd rather flattered and pleased by the idea. He might indeed consider it novel, as I am the first American artist in musick that ever undertook it."

After being accepted as a member of Spohr's own orchestra, Hill goes on to enumerate the violin virtuoso's qualities as a conductor and a gentleman: "Spohr took me into his orchestra, a right which only his pupils have. ... Spohr in every situation but when directing his orchestra and singers at rehearsals is a gentleman, excellent husband, father – has no vicious habits of any description, don't even smoke, is rich and is highly respected. At rehearsals he uses the most abominable expressions, such as calling the women sows, swine, the men asses and that they are not fit for their situations. Out of the orchestra he is very polite."

In Kassel Hill chafed at the requirement to show obeisance to the ruling Prince. "Have passed

only a pace in front of the Prince without saluting him as is the fashion to do here. He look'd very sour and the officers etc stair'd at us but I could not see anything particular in the Prince to merit this distinction, besides he was never introduced to me."

Hill experienced not only the hauteur of royalty in Kassel, but also a style of music-making that amazed him with its informality and decadence. "In the Euterpian Society there are about 40 generally playing in their orchestra. The professors come in the same in N.Y. They smoke rather more to be sure but this is always the case. I have seen at a quartett party all with their pipes in their mouths smoking with one end, resting all on the floor – smoking of pipes which are of every form conceivable. ... They will smoke when playing incessantly but when they arrive at a difficult passage the fume is tremendous. One would suppose they could not smoke while playing but it seems as natural to them as breathing. The first time I saw this it seem'd very ludicrous. The air seems only fit for their respiration when it is crowded with tobacco smoke that you cannot see across a room of 15 feet."

Hill returned to New York in the spring of 1837 and took up his regular musical pursuits again. In 1842 a meeting of local musicians led by Hill voted to establish the Philharmonic Society of New York and he conducted its opening concert.

The orchestra's mandated size was 53 members, fines from 50 cents to five dollars were to be assessed for non-attendance at rehearsals and concerts, and a regular rehearsal schedule was posted in advance.

The first work in the opening concert, led by Hill, was Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in C minor, a work Hill had already conducted in its American première in 1841. Years later, the *New York Tribune* described this 1842 inaugural concert as a "strange scene of enthusiasm. The symphony chosen was the C minor of Beethoven. ... The musicians almost went wild with delight. ... They threw themselves into each other's arms laughing, weeping and applauding in a breath. The effect on the public ... was similar. The enthusiasm was indescribable. The success of the Society was assured at the start."

Hill kept up his contacts with European musicians including Spohr and Mendelssohn and planned a "Grand Musical Festival" in New York for 1846. The story of this attempt is related by Dr Martin Wulfhorst in his article "Hill, Spohr, Mendelssohn and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: A Mid-Nineteenth Century Music Festival in New York" which appeared in the Newsletter of the Institute for Studies in American Music, Volume XV, Number 2,⁵ May 1986. We acknowledge this source for what follows.

Spohr was the figure Hill first turned to for his festival. As Dr Wulfhorst suggests, he probably hoped not only to enlist a musician with extensive experience in directing festivals but also to attract one of international fame who would be a drawing card for the New York project. On November 16, 1844, Hill wrote to Spohr:

"It has been resolved to produce a Grand Musical Festival in N York, the first that has taken place in America – which is to come off either in the autumn of 1845 or the spring of 1846 which will depend upon contingencies, principally as respects the proposition in the name of the committee which I am about to make you.

"From the renown of your name, far and near, your stupendous talents, & your known liberality in the promotion of the cause of the musical art both in Germany & England particularly I am in the name of the Musical Festival committee (of which I am a member) directed to solicit your co-operation as conductor on the occasion. – Your passage from Liverpool to N.Y. and back in a steamer will be provided and \$1,000 at least will be guaranteed to you in [the] event of your consent to come being acceded to – *if you should be able to come we should want an immediate answer.* And at the same time we should wish to have your Fall of Babylon

for one of the performances immediately [so] that it may be put in rehearsal – the money will be remitted for it either on receiving it or before it is ready on your order for it.

“– Come and we will give you a hearty American welcome. At the same time you will see your amiable daughter. If you come in the spring [of 1846] it will be a favorable time after the performances are over to make a tour of the country – altho’ we should prefer the autumn of 1845 – I have started this project & it will surely be accomplished. The number of chorus singers will consist of at least 500 choral singers [*sic*] – 250 instruments and 15 solo vocalists besides the instrumental solo performers. – We propose to have two performances of sacred music and two performances of secular.

“I trust you will write on receipt of this without fail – if you give us any encouragement of your being with us we shall be satisfied – In the event of its being out of your power to obtain your Prince’s consent we shall next look to your gifted countryman Mendelssohn but I need not say that you are the unanimous choice. If you cannot come a change of the arrangements would be required and therefore it is of the most vital importance to have an early answer from you –

With the best wishes for the health and happiness of your Lady and family.

I remain your sincere friend and grateful pupil.

U.C. Hill.

“PS. Dear Sir please communicate my highest esteem to Mr Hauptman[n] – also to the musical gentlemen of my acquaintance in your orchestra. I hope to see you again as I contemplate visiting dear Germany in about three years.

Yours &c,

U.C. Hill.”

Unfortunately, Spohr had to decline the invitation as he explained in a letter from Kassel dated January 4, 1845:

“As honourable to me as your invitation to conduct the first American music festival is, my duties are unfortunately of a character to compel me to decline. You will know from the English journals that I was unable to get a furlough for the Norwich festival three years ago. Since then I have had many unpleasant experiences of the same character. Only a short time ago I had to decline another invitation from Norwich, a second one from Berlin, where my “Fall of Babylon” was given for the first time, a third for the opening of a new music hall in Hamburg and [I] was only lucky enough to secure a week’s furlough to conduct a music festival in Braunschweig [Brunswick, in September 1844], where my “Fall of Babylon” was also performed.

“To visit America I should have to ask a furlough of at least three months, and such I dare not ask. I must therefore forego the honour which you had planned for me, and I make haste to inform you of the fact since your letter was en route an incredibly long time, and did not reach my hands until the last days of the year which has just ended. If you should nevertheless still have a mind to perform my oratorio “The Fall of Babylon”, you can get the [full] score, pianoforte score and voice parts with English text from Professor Edward Taylor (Red Lion Court, Fleet Street, London), for our German edition published by Breitkopf und Härtel, in Leipzig, has only German words.

“If now you want to turn to Mendelssohn, know that he lives in Frankfurt am Main, has severed his connections with Berlin, and will not be compelled, like me, to decline your invitation because of inability to get leave of absence. Have the goodness to greet my daughter and her family most heartily, and say to her that my new opera [*Die Kreuzfahrer*] was received with an enthusiasm wholly unheard of in Kassel on New Year’s Day, and will be repeated within a few days. We shall soon write to her and report our musical doings during the winter. In the home of her sister [Ida Wolff] and in our own all is well. Greatly did we rejoice at the

intelligence that you are contemplating another visit to Europe and that we may hope to see you here. Farewell and keep in friendly recollection your devoted Louis Spohr.”

Dr Wulfhorst notes that Spohr’s autobiography makes clearer the reason behind his decision: “He soon made up his mind to decline, as a residence there of the few weeks only, which the duties of his place [in Kassel] would perhaps have permitted, would scarcely have compensated for the fatigue of a long journey.”

In the event Mendelssohn too declined an invitation from Hill and circumstances dictated that the “festival” was reduced to a single “Festival Concert” on May 20, 1846. Instead of Spohr’s *Fall of Babylon*, Hill staged Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony under the baton of George Loder junior for its American première before an audience of some 2,000, despite the fact that tickets cost the then astronomical price of two dollars each. The choral parts had been translated into English and copyrighted by Hill and the Philharmonic.

Soon afterwards Hill moved to Cincinnati and was later involved with the highly successful Boston Jubilee concerts, massive choral-orchestral events in 1869 and 1872 that drew thousands of performers including the waltz king, Johann Strauss, for the latter.

Hill moved back to New York hoping to make his fortune through an instrument of his own invention, a new kind of piano in which tuning forks were used in place of strings. Sadly, this coincided with the Steinways bringing to perfection their own pianos and his new venture brought him only financial disaster.

By 1873 the 71-year-old Hill was no longer capable of playing with the Philharmonic or finding pupils, and his professional and financial decline brought on feelings of deep despair. In 1875 he committed suicide at his home in Paterson, New Jersey.

Note

Mention of Spohr’s daughter in Hill’s letter to the composer quoted above refers to his elder daughter, Emilie Spohr-Zahn, who followed her husband from Kassel to New York in May 1841 and made her American debut there on March 15, 1842 as contralto soloist in a performance of Handel’s *Messiah* under Hill’s direction. Spohr had recommended her to Hill in a letter now in the New York Public Library. She also performed in a festival of Anthony Philip Heinrich on June 16, 1842 (these details from Martin Wulfhorst’s article of 1986).