

TWO SPOHR REVIEWS OF 1831 FROM 'THE HARMONICON'

Following Spohr's first visit to London in 1820, readers of the English musical journal The Harmonicon were kept up to date with reviews of his works as they were performed both in Britain and on the continent until, as the 1830s dawned, there was a major impetus given to his reputation by the British premieres of Zemire und Azor and The Last Judgment. We reproduce the reviews of the performance of the opera and the English edition of the oratorio from The Harmonicon and it will be noted that in Zemire und Azor, highlights from both Faust and Jessonda were fitted into the plot.

Zemire und Azor

Covent Garden Theatre April 5, 1831 (first time in England).

Dramatis Personæ,

Azor (a young Prince transformed by Nigromante the Enchanter) Mr. Wilson
 Sander (a merchant of Ormus) Mr. Morley
 Ali (his slave) Mr. G. Penson
 Fatima – Lesbia – Zemira (daughters of Sander). Miss Cawse, Miss H. Cawse, Miss Inverarity
 Rosadelle (Genius of the Rose and protectress of Azor) Miss Lawrence
 Nigromante (an Enchanter and enemy of Azor) Mr. Evans

THE production of Spohr's German opera, to which is given the name of *Azor and Zemira*, may be almost considered as a musical era in the history of this theatre and reflects great credit on all who have been concerned in bringing it before a British audience. The story is so well known in every nursery in Europe, now told with the slight addition of a necromancer. Marmontel dramatised the tale in 1770 and Gretry's fame was founded on the music he set to it, and very soon spread itself all over Europe, and for many years retained its popularity.

In 1779 it was brought out at the King's Theatre; and in the same year the drama was translated by Sir George Collier, the elder Linley wrote music to it, and it was performed at Drury Lane but did not long keep possession of the stage, though the beautiful song "No flower that grows is like this rose" is still and must for ever continue to be admired.

The *Zemire et Azor* as set by Gretry had, therefore, no serious rival till after the lapse of many years, when Spohr in 1823 [recte 1818-19] undertook the task of recomposing it. Gretry's opera which, even in Paris, was growing out of date, may from that moment be considered defunct.

We have long been of the opinion that Spohr shows his strength more in vocal than in instrumental music. He is laborious in both, but in the latter too often obscure; a fault from which the very nature of what is to be performed by the human voice, an instrument of very limited power, guards him to a certain extent.

Notes easily produced by the violin or clarinet are difficult to sing and many combinations that offer no impediment to a band are nearly impracticable to vocalists; hence the composer is in the one case laid under restraint, whatever his inclination may prompt, and he is reasonable frequently against his will.

Such has been his situation in the present instance; the music, though some of it imposes a task of great difficulty on the performer, is all practicable to singers who are tolerable musicians – such as are to be found in Germany, France and England. In Italy it could not as a whole be got

up; three-fourths of the vocalists of that country sing by ear; to them the German opera, particularly if not already known by frequent performance, is unintelligible and as sour as the grapes to Reynard in the fable.

The prevailing character of this opera is scientific; the composer has from ingenious harmonic combinations brought out most of his best effects, but by no means neglected melody, much of which of a very elegant, if not of a light and immediately striking kind, will be discovered after a second hearing and not only be better understood, which follows as a matter of course, but also make a stronger and more favourable impression the oftener it is listened to, and the more familiarly it becomes known.

We do not here enter particularly into the many beauties and merits of this opera for two reasons: – 1st. We shall shortly have to notice it in our review. 2nd. In a supplementary number to our work are published most of what we consider the best compositions of a generally practicable kind contained in the German edition, as well as the incantation scene added from “Faust” and the duet from “Jessonda”, to all of which (with the exception of two pieces arranged for pianoforte alone) we have adapted English words.

The opera is got up with the most praiseworthy care and, as regards expense, with a liberality highly honourable to the theatre. The performers evidently take a deep interest in the work, and their success is in exact proportion to their means.

Miss Inverarity sings much of what is assigned to her admirably so far as relates to power, correctness and intonation; where great delicacy is called for, as in the romance “The address to the Rose”, she certainly does not come up to our expectations, or at least our hopes. In her grand scena, a long and most laborious bravura, her great physical strength and flexibility of vocal organs, together with her zeal in the cause, enable her to vanquish all its difficulties in a most triumphant manner.

The two Misses Cawse also entitle themselves to our praise for the simple and effective style in which they sing the pretty duet from “Jessonda” as well as for their effectual support in the concerted pieces.

Mr. Wilson exceeds our expectations; nevertheless there are parts in this opera, especially in his last air, to which he is in every way unequal. Mr. Morley also gets through his character much better than we anticipated; still, the opera stands in need of a really efficient bass. And Mr. Penson, as a singer, is quite inadequate to the part allotted him.

Thus, so far as the male characters are filled, the opera might be much better supported; nevertheless it must be stated in fairness that the difficulty of this work to performers chiefly accustomed to our English theatrical productions must have been great, and nothing but great industry, their confined means being considered, has enabled them to succeed to the extent they do.

The choruses are well sustained and it would be unjust not to mention the attention and efforts of the band in terms of the warmest praise. And, lastly, Sir George Smart has our own best thanks for the activity and ability he has shown in getting this opera up, as well as for the aid he has given to the cause of music by bringing forward a work which must assist in improving our taste in dramatic music.

The Last Judgment

Review from the June 1831 issue

FOR the introduction of this oratorio into England, we are indebted to one of those provincial festivals which, during the last few years, have done more for the cause of good sacred music than the metropolis can boast of having achieved since the importation of *The Creation* thirty and forty years ago.

To the committee for managing the last Norwich meeting, and to Mr. E. Taylor for his recommendation to them, we owe our knowledge of the present work of Spohr which, but for the judgment of the one, and the enterprise of the other, might have remained unnoticed in this country some seven or eight years, as is the case of *Zemira and Azor* of the same composer, produced by him in 1823 (sic), if not earlier, and only just brought before the British public.

Whether it is that there is more leisure for the cultivation of music in the country, or a better taste for the art than in London, we will not undertake to decide; but it is clear that, in proportion to the population and means of performance, much greater encouragement is given in our large manufacturing towns to the higher class of composition – it is better understood and consequently more enjoyed – than in this vast city, though the money raised here by operas, musical dramas, concerts, lessons etc reaches a sum beyond the belief of those who have not made an attempt to calculate the amount.

The oratorio of *The Last Judgment* is not cast in a dramatic form, neither does it tell any story but consists of a series of texts borrowed and imitated from the sacred writings in the manner of the *Messiah*. The first part prepares us for the great and awful day; the second is meant to describe it; but the language is vague and only one chorus, “Destroyed is Babylon the Mighty”, can be considered as at all in the shape of narrative. Indeed there is some incongruity in this portion of the words for, after the chorus referred to, which relates the events of the Last Judgment – after the whole is declared to be “ended” – the advent of the Saviour “to give everyone according to his works” is foretold as if it had never taken place.

It is rather a remarkable feature in this work that it contains no single song, properly so called; there are many solos for the different voices but these are so broken by recitative or so incorporated with the chorus that not a detached air is to be found in the volume. The first part consists of an overture and such solos as we have described; also of a quartet, intermingled with five choruses. To the second part is an introductory symphony, likewise a duet, a quartet, both detached, and three choruses, having solos blended with them as before.

The overture in D is, by a certain degree of gravity which prevails in it, well suited to the sentiment pervading the whole of the first part. It is exceedingly well written for the orchestra, as indeed are all Spohr’s works; but we do not here trace that master hand which is so apparent in the choruses. This, in the copy before us, is arranged according to the author’s usual practice, for two performers on one instrument; and thus all the effects resulting from harmony are obtained.

The first chorus, “Praise his awful name” is a tranquil, pleasing piece, consisting mainly of simple counterpoint. The solos in this, for a treble and a bass, derive their effect from contrast; they are deficient in melody and laboriously written. The bass solo “Come up hither” is a fine specimen of studied harmony and opens into the lovely tenor solo and chorus which will be found, page 114, among the music of our present number.

We pass by the next five pages which do not invite any remark and come to a choral fugue on the words “Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto him” which, having called forth all the genius of the greatest composer that ever lived, much excited our curiosity, The construction of this is scientific and the effect good; we will not say more for it is unnecessary to look at it in a comparative point of view.

The last chorus in the first part, preceded like the others by solos and full of semi-choral or soli responses, is devotional and impressive; the key, G flat, is the chief and only objection to it. Here the composer shows his weakness: his passion for such extraneous modes; double sharps and flats are his idols; he worships these and also crowded, complicated harmony in the same way that more sensible men adore and seek after simplicity whenever, without sacrifice of effect,

it can be attained. Such pedantry – for sheer pedantry it is – carries certain punishment along with it, because few, except expert professors, are *au fait* in keys of so extreme a kind and, consequently, numbers who might have become admirers of the work, thrust it aside, either in dismay or disgust when they find such a cloud of sharps and flats at the clef and so many double ones – evils which must necessarily follow – in every staff.

The introductory symphony to the second part, in C minor, corresponds in character and skilful composition to the higher order of music, of which it is the precursor; for the second part, at which we are now arrived, in every way far exceeds the first. In design it exhibits stronger intellect, it shows more genius in execution and, as a sure result of these combined qualities, its effect in performance is incomparably superior.

After a long accompanied recitative (solo, it is denominated), the duet for soprano and tenor in G “Forsake me not in this dread hour” breaks upon us with a mild lustre and onwards, to the end of the oratorio, all is admirable. In this, M. Spohr has trusted to the strength of his melody, a beautiful, imploring strain, and to the force of expression which here excites as much emotion in the auditor as the composer must have felt when he conceived it. The accompaniment also seems to have flowed more naturally than usual from the pen of the author, though pages 77 and 78 display abundant musical learning but of that rational kind which produces equivalent effect. The latter part of this duet is included in the music of our present number, page 115.

In the succeeding chorus in E minor “If with your whole hearts”, the voices sing the divine promise in octaves and where the performers are numerous and go well together, the effect is very imposing. The two bars of harmony at “Thus saith the Lord” are equally well imagined.

We now come to the finest chorus, both as regards construction and effect, in the whole oratorio, “Destroyed is Babylon the mighty”. Its originality and vigour are announced at the very commencement. The burst of voices on the words “ascendeth, ascendeth evermore” excites an emotion of the most powerful kind; but the following modulations at the words “the grave gives up its dead (*pp*), the sea gives up its dead, the seals are broken (*cresc.*), the books are now (*f*) unclosed” in the same chorus, as beautiful as original, form a passage that will not be easily matched in the whole range of musical composition.

The chorus proceeds in its admirable course; the foregoing passage is repeated a semitone higher when, abruptly, the voices come to a close on the dominant; but the instruments continue and in howling successions of half notes – here employed with some show of reason – express the despair of the wicked. These cease and a few soft delicious chords lead to the quartet and chorus printed in our last December number beginning “Blessed are the dead” which we transposed for the convenience of the general performer. It would be an unnecessary expenditure of words to pronounce any encomiums on this exquisite composition now; it has been heard by most judges and lovers of music and invariably admired by all for the simplicity of its language, which is one of its great merits, unfolds its beauties alike to the most skilful professor and the less informed amateur.

A solo, half air, half recitative, leads to a few charming bars for four voices, then to the words “Then come, Lord Jesus” and immediately follows the last chorus “Great and wonderful are all Thy works” in which the author has exerted all his strength and produced a composition so original, so highly wrought and so splendid that alone it is enough to transmit his name to very distant posterity. In this there are no less than three finely-conducted fugues, the excellence whereof is not only discernable by the scientific eye but at once obvious to all who, by that practical knowledge which is acquired by the frequent hearing of this species of music, are capable of feeling their effect and of forming an estimate of their value.

This and some other parts of the present oratorio will, we predict, be as well known in a few

years as the most favoured works of the greatest masters. As a whole, the want of that relief which single airs afford will be a bar to its frequent use; but copious selections from it will rarely, if ever, fail of success; and indeed, the real connoisseur will listen with pleasure to the entire work, which is little more than an hour and a half in duration, for the sake of tracing the conceptions, progressively, that is, of the composer, whose unity of design is apparent, as his manner of developing is consistent. It would be unjust to quit this publication without adding that the adaptation of the English version – a task of great difficulty – is as perfect as, in such a case, a discriminating mind, united to sound knowledge, could make it.