

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF THE LOUIS-SPOHR-GESELLSCHAFT

by Maurice F. Powell

THE centenary of the formation of the Louis-Spohr-Gesellschaft falls on October 12th 2008 and its story over this hundred-year span is one of great endeavour. The enthusiasm of the early advocates and their belief in the value of Spohr's music; the struggle for recognition and then for survival against Nazi treachery; the re-formation of the society followed by reorganisation and expansion are the main elements of this history which is a fascinating one.

Spohr's name has always been inseparably linked with Kassel (known as Cassel until the 1920s), the German town where he was Hof kapellmeister from 1822 until 1857. Situated on the river Fulda in a large basin surrounded by the beautiful wooded hills of Hesse, Kassel has a rich cultural history. Spohr added a significant chapter to this heritage by transforming what was a small provincial musical backwater into a leading centre of the art with a flourishing opera and one of the finest orchestras in Germany.

At the time of Spohr's death in 1859 the city was the capital of the independent electorate of Hesse-Kassel but following the victory of Prussia over Austria in July 1866, the Austrian emperor had to agree to the formation of a Prussian-dominated North German Confederation to the north of the river Main. Prussia also gained a free hand to make annexations in north Germany and consequently Hesse-Kassel became part of Prussia.

This major political change affected the standing of Kassel and with the declaration of the German empire in January 1871 following Prussian success in the war against France, Kassel became just a provincial city. The nationalistic fervour which followed the victory in the Franco-Prussian war produced an atmosphere in Germany which was hardly favourable to a musician with Spohr's views on liberty, democracy and peaceful co-existence, views which he had made clear in his posthumously-published autobiography.

Consequently his music was snubbed in the Kaiser's court and it is reported that sometimes musicians had to bill Spohr's works as by Gounod in order to get them in the programmes there. Whatever the truth of this, when Spohr's widow, Marianne, died in 1892 her heirs handed over to the city of Kassel a considerable amount of Spohr material on the understanding that a Spohr museum would be set up. But the general attitude of the authorities to Spohr, even in Kassel, meant that little was done towards this aim and the composer seemed to be heading for oblivion except as a name in the music history books.

It was in Kassel in 1908 that a group of musicians and men of letters decided to revive interest in Spohr and his music. The Spohr Gesellschaft was founded but plans for an archive, while not actively opposed, were met with indifference by the city fathers. Justification was demanded even for the collection of a few Spohr souvenirs housed in the Court Theatre.

It must seem strange to us that the citizens of Kassel should have been so apathetic about "their" composer but it must be remembered that a new musical era had dawned; in Germany it was the time of the pilgrimages to Bayreuth and the name of Wagner had joined that of Beethoven to be revered above all others to a degree which eventually saw them used in the increasingly militant area of German nationalism.

Nevertheless, the secretary of the Spohr Gesellschaft, Heinrich Stein, pressed on with his efforts to amass a really significant Spohr collection. He was so successful that this collection

eventually outdid the one held by the city of Kassel which had been stored in a so-called Spohr Memorial Room, located in an attic at the Murhardt Library. Herr Stein put his collection on display at his own Kassel home at No 17, Friedrichstraße.

For many years the memory of Spohr was kept alive by the devotees of the Spohr Gesellschaft then in 1920, after the abdication of the Hohenzollern monarchy and the foundation of the Weimar Republic, the city of Kassel merged its collection with that of Herr Stein in his "Spohr Konservatorium".

Three heavy blows seriously affected this development. Firstly came the death of Herr Stein in April 1922 when his heirs wished to live in his house so the Spohr material there had to be cleared out. Then, after the city moved the Spohr collection to rooms in the former royal palace on the Friedrichsplatz, the period of huge inflation followed by its aftermath and the need for economic prudence meant that the material had to be moved back to the Murhardt Library.

The third and most crucial blow came in 1933 when the worthy efforts of the Spohr Gesellschaft fell victim to the Nazi regime; Spohr's name was discredited, it was removed from the title of the Kassel music conservatory, his music and the Spohr Gesellschaft banned. The official reason was that the work of the society was being financed by idealists, men who were later forced to wear the yellow star of David. There were other reasons, certainly connected with the hideous and far-reaching Nazi cultural policy. No doubt account was also taken of Spohr's strong liberal politics, the fact that he was a Freemason and included among his friends Jewish composers such as Mendelssohn, Moscheles and Meyerbeer.

The ban was not enough for the Nazi mayor of Kassel, Dr. Gustav Lahmeyer. On May 14th 1934 he ordered the destruction of much of the museum and archive stock. Luckily, we owe the survival of much of this material to the bravery of some Kassel librarians who ignored the order and salvaged what they could.

In 1954 the eminent Romantic scholar Franz Uhlendorff gathered around him a circle of enthusiasts with the intention of re-forming the society. With the help and encouragement of the Kassel publisher Herfried Homburg, an archive was founded; the basis of the present-day Internationale Louis-Spohr-Gesellschaft. For many years Herr Homburg was secretary of the society and curator of the archive. The plan was to collect as much Spohriana as possible and also material relating to violins and violinists, thus paying homage to the fact that Spohr founded the last great German school of violin playing.

At first the archive was situated on the top floor of the Murhardt Library in the Brüder-Grimm-Platz and consisted of one large room and one very much smaller room. These crowded conditions were not very satisfactory so in July 1970, the Lord Mayor of Kassel, Dr. Karl Branner, proposed that the archive be transferred to the more spacious apartments in the Palais Bellevue, one of Kassel's town palaces in the once-fashionable Schöne Aussicht. Spohr lived for a time in this broad avenue overlooking the parklands and the river Fulda. The rooms were ready for the move in 1976.

The ground floor of the palace is given over to the Brothers Grimm Museum while the Spohr archive has most of the first floor comprising four rooms. The collection includes display cases containing manuscripts, letters, diaries, notebooks, concert hand-bills, photographs, sketches and small portraits. Around the walls are portraits of Spohr, his two wives, his three daughters, his parents, friends, contemporary composers, his pupils and the many eminent artists, writers, poets and philosophers who were his colleagues.

The documents include items by Spohr, Paganini, Schumann, Karol Lipinski, Joachim, August Wilhelmj, Karl Marx (the musician) and others. Also on display are the proofs for Bela Bartok's *Deux Portraits* with the composer's corrections, first editions of violin methods and violin

compositions from all eras, historical programme books, concert tickets, visiting cards, medals and decorated batons from the nineteenth century.

A hitherto unknown pencil portrait of Mendelssohn and a beautiful wax relief in orange of Paganini presented to Spohr by his one-time rival are among the rare and valuable exhibits to be found in the archive. Also displayed are items of furniture from Spohr's home including his desk, a chair, a small cabinet and his piano built by Johann Andreas Streicher and played on by many famous musicians: Hummel, Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer, Moscheles, Liszt, Clara Schumann and many others who visited Spohr in Kassel.

Also to be seen is a single-action harp by Nadermann from before 1810, the type of instrument that Spohr's first wife, Dorette, owned. Other instruments include violins by well-known makers such as Nicola Amati, Jean Vauchel, Gabriel David and Joseph Buchstetter from Regensburg, Joh. Georgius and Matthias Thir, Martin Stoss, Johannes Georgius Leeb II, Johann Christoph Leidolff from Vienna, a two-hundred-year-old pochette (a dancing master's fiddle), flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoon, brass instruments from 1780 to 1840 and other instruments.

In one room the bulk of the society's collection of manuscripts and scores is kept. Many editions of Spohr's works are to be found here. The archive also possesses microfilm copies of most of Spohr's music. The entire collection was valued in 1972 at 1,000,000 marks. A good deal of genuine musical cultural history can be re-lived in the archive. For instance there are documents relating to the Kassel charity founded by Spohr, the "Fund for Pensioners, Widows and Orphans of Deceased Chapel Members", letters by Spohr, Wagner, Mahler, Wieniawski, Gounod, Hellmesberger, d'Albert, Spohr's pupils and many more.

There is also the Spohr Genealogical Archive, a collection established by the genealogist and publisher Oswald Spohr which consists of several thousand documents covering the descendants of the Municipal Barber and Surgeon Christoph Spohr (1605-79) from Alfeld on the river Leine. The larger Spohr family included famous artists and scholars as well as the "Iron Chancellor" Otto von Bismarck who, like Louis Spohr, stood well over six foot in height. It is amazing to think that the contrasting political views of composer and chancellor are encompassed within the family tree of the Spohr Genealogical Archive.

Because the society relies partly on state funding, the fluctuating political fortunes of the various parties in Kassel has meant that things have not always gone smoothly. For instance, the publication of scholarly scores in a series of selected works of Spohr, the "Neue Auswahl der Werke", has been held up by the cutbacks in official funding so that to date only three volumes have been issued, the last as far back as 1983. Both the Second Clarinet Concerto and the First Concertante for two violins and orchestra had reached proof stages by the early 1990s but they still await publication. The latest crisis facing the society came some five years ago when the museum in the Palais Bellevue had to be closed for urgently needed repairs as flakes of paint and plaster fell daily from the ceilings. The Kassel city council declined to finance the repairs and instead suggested that the society rent rooms in the Kassel Music Academy. This was an insensitive idea because the Academy was set up by the Nazis after they had closed the Spohr Music Conservatory. A number of items confiscated by the Nazis were given to the Academy which still retains them despite clear evidence that they are the property of the society.

In this situation the society decided to try to raise enough funds to buy its own property and at the moment that attempt continues as well as a search for suitable premises. Meanwhile some progress has been made in renovating the Bellevue rooms but a further threat arose with the Brothers Grimm Museum campaigning to take over the whole of the Palais Bellevue.

We hope that all of these hurdles can be overcome just as the crushing blow from the Nazi regime was defeated with the re-formation in 1954.