

AN 1852 LONDON VIEW OF 'FAUST'

by J. Wrey Mould

The interest aroused by the 1852 production of Faust in London prompted Thomas Boosey to issue a vocal score of the opera as Volume Twelve in his series "The Standard Lyric Drama". As Spohr's newly-composed recitatives were not yet generally available Boosey had to use the earlier version with spoken dialogue. The piano arrangement was by Mendelssohn's pupil William Smyth Rockstro while the text was translated into English by J. Wrey Mould. The translator also added some essays including the one reprinted here on that 1852 revival.

THE first performance of Spohr's romantic opera of *Faust* on the Italian stage in this country took place on July 16th with a success alike honourable to the composer and the artists, vocal and instrumental, engaged in the execution of his work. The house was crowded to suffocation. The event was a musical event in the strongest signification of the term, and almost all the musicians and amateurs of distinction, foreign and native, then in the metropolis, were present on the occasion. Dr. Spohr himself, the greatest conductor on the continent, presided in the orchestra.

Its production has opened a new field well worth exploring; and its success may possibly induce the directors of the Royal Italian Opera to remember that there are eight or nine more works from the same hand comparatively unknown to the English public. Among these in our opinion *Azor and Zemira*, the *Berggeist*, *Jessonda*, and the *Alchymist* are the best suited to the Italian stage.

No performance has been more entirely creditable to the Royal Italian Opera than that of *Faust*. Every pains had been taken beforehand; and there were no less than four full band rehearsals under Dr. Spohr's own direction – something almost unprecedented in the lyrical establishments of this metropolis. The cast of the chief characters was very efficient. Ronconi's Faust was, without exception, the best we have seen. His acting and singing were equally irreproachable. Without encroaching upon the severe simplicity of style best suited to the music, he applied the grace and fervour which are the peculiar characteristics of the Italian school with such discretion and good taste that the smoothed and richly clothed melodies of the great German master were endowed with almost a new feeling. His singing of the first song, "E t'Amore", was perfect both in taste and expression; and in the grand scena, "Di chi sarò?" in which the principal theme of the overture is prominently worked, he overcame the vocal difficulties with the utmost ease.

Nor probably was there ever so efficient a representative of Hugo as Tamberlik, whose romantic bearing and manly deportment gave force and reality to the character. In the aria, "Ah non temer", he sang with astonishing fire and executed the bravura passages at the end, which are of great difficulty, with equal decision and purity of intonation. To obtain an encore in one of Spohr's operas where the various pieces are so closely knit together into one whole is an event of rare occurrence; but so delighted were the audience with Tamberlik that they would hear of no denial and he was forced to repeat the aria amidst tumults of applause.

Had Mademoiselle Anna Zerr played Cunegunda and Madame Castellan Rosa, both ladies would have been better suited. Nevertheless both did extremely well. Madame Castellan has not

sung so effectively before during the present season. In the grand and elaborate air, "Si lo sento", in the florid air from *Der Zweikampf*, "Solinga io son", introduced into the opera expressly for her, and in the passionate recitative at the commencement of the last finale, "Qual mai sogno", she was equally successful and equally applauded. We cannot, however, admit the necessity of a second air, since the parting of Cunegunda and the opera itself, are quite long enough, with the addition of the recitatives, to render all interpolations superfluous.

Mademoiselle Zerr was charming as Rosa. Her manner was extremely prepossessing and her acting denoted the highest intelligence. Her only solo – the pathetic air in G minor, "Se dir son tua", which can hardly fail to recall to the hearer Pamina's song in *Zauberflöte* – was sung with exquisite feeling; and nothing could be more irreproachable than her love duet with Ronconi, "Meco vieni", in the first scene.

The Mephistopheles of Herr Formes was very great. As a piece of acting it was remarkable for subtlety. Herr Formes made the character as repulsive as possible; but he carefully drew the distinction between the social Mephistopheles and the Mephistopheles communing with unholy spirits or gloating over Faust, his victim. In the last act where he threw off his disguise, appeared as the fiend and dragged Faust into the flaming abyss, his acting was very striking and the whole scene between him and Ronconi was so forcibly portrayed that the absurdity of the situation was lost in the earnestness and vigour of the performers. Mephistopheles has a vast deal to sing, in recitatives and concerted pieces especially, and Herr Formes was always thoroughly efficient. His great vocal effort, however, was in the air, "Va Sbrammando", for which Dr. Spohr has composed a new and masterly recitative. This was delivered by Herr Formes with extraordinary power of voice and great dramatic intensity, and raised the enthusiasm of the audience. We have rarely heard this fine piece of music more admirably declaimed.

From the minor characters we must single out the Franz of Signor Stigelli as a careful and finished performance. In the trio where Franz escorts Rosa from Strasburg and Mephistopheles charms them both to sleep (perhaps the most original and powerful composition in the opera) the musical proficiency of Signor Stigelli was of manifest advantage. Signors Romani, Luigi Mei and Polonini in the little parts of Kaylinger, Wagner and Golfo were useful and efficient; Mademoiselle Seguin, the contralto, did the best for the music of the witch, Sycorax; and Signor Soldi, as Wohlhaldt, one of the lovers of Rosa, sang the popular drinking song, "Allegra il vin", with a great deal of spirit. In short, the singers as a body used every exertion to produce a good ensemble and the result was unusually perfect.

The band, conducted by Dr. Spohr who was received with long-continued cheering, fully maintained its reputation as the first operatic orchestra in Europe. The overture was superbly executed and the strictest attention to light and shade was observed in the varied and elaborate accompaniments. In the cathedral scene the organ behind the scenes was played to perfection; and the unseen chorus was heard with fine effect in the beautiful prayer in F, "Versa o ciel". The chorus was for the most part exceedingly good and would have been still better if they had acted with a little more life; in the scene of the Blocksberg, however, there was a want of decision. The opera was placed on the stage in a highly effective manner; and a more striking scenic effect has never been produced than the burning of Gulf's castle at the end of Act the First.

The honours paid to Dr. Spohr were commensurate with his high merits. He was recalled unanimously at the end of the first act and applauded with enthusiasm, and at the conclusion was similarly complimented. A more marked respect could not have been paid to him or a heartier appreciation shown of his genius as a dramatic composer. We have no doubt but that succeeding future performances of this (despite its faults) highly estimable work at the Royal Italian Opera will conduce to establish it in the favour of the English public.