

# SPOHR AND WAGNER

by Keith Warsop

IN 1823 shortly before the first performance of his opera *Jessonda*, the 39-year-old Louis Spohr published "An Address to the German Composers" in the leading musical journal *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. Spohr stated that the "insipid sweetness" of current Italian opera and the "second-rate abilities" of those French composers who had succeeded Cherubini and Méhul had left the German public longing for "that which is of real and intrinsic value".

He called on more German composers to write for the stage as "an opportunity presents itself here for portraying all the passions of the human heart which could not be found elsewhere". Spohr went on to suggest that it was essential to "compose music of a true dramatic character adapted in every respect to the subject both in tone, style and character; nor ought we, on such occasions as are suitable, to neglect the employment of those means with which the modern orchestra is provided".

He concluded his remarks by hoping that "if these hints should prove useful but to one individual among those youthful students who are exercising themselves in the study of music, then the author will not think he has communicated his thoughts in vain".

It is tempting to think that the ten-year-old Richard Wagner might have been one of those "youthful students" referred to by Spohr. Certainly, the success of Spohr's *Jessonda* following soon after that of Weber with *Der Freischütz* gave a boost to German opera which helped to provide a foundation upon which Wagner was to build such a mighty edifice.

Spohr had been appointed Kapellmeister in Kassel at the beginning of 1822 and he remained in the city until his death in 1859. The state of Hesse-Kassel was ruled autocratically by Elector Wilhelm II who was determined to have an opera house second to none and in order to achieve this he was willing to turn a blind eye to the liberal and democratic views of his famous Kapellmeister.

However, the Elector was affected by the revolutions which broke out in the wake of the French uprising of 1830 and retired to his country palace, leaving his son to rule as regent. Friedrich Wilhelm I was a notorious reactionary who was certainly not as tolerant as his father when it came to Spohr's political opinions. Nevertheless, Spohr did manage to get Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* into production in Kassel which was the first German city to stage the work after its Dresden opening.

Spohr was an extraordinarily well-balanced mix of the progressive and the conservative. Though he worshipped Mozart and remarked that he judged all music by that extremely high standard, yet he himself liked to experiment and to test himself in various new forms. Among genres he invented were the Double Quartet, the through-composed violin concerto, the Nonet for wind and strings and the Quartet-Concerto as well as reviving the string sextet, dormant since Boccherini more than 70 years earlier.

Spohr never completely altered his 1823 attitude to opera though in his own case he never again achieved the heights of *Jessonda* with the public with whom only his earlier operas *Faust* and *Zemire und Azor* proved anywhere near as successful. Though his later operas contain much magnificent music, for various reasons they never managed to gain a repertoire place.

So when, in 1843, Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* came to his notice he was determined to produce it as it matched his own ideals so closely. It was not only the music of *The Dutchman* which impressed Spohr. After reading the libretto, written by Wagner himself, he said he found

it so satisfactory in every respect that he regarded it as a little masterpiece. He only regretted that he had not been offered “as good a one to set to music ten years earlier”.

During rehearsals Spohr wrote to a friend: “This work, although somewhat approaching the new romantic music à la Berlioz, and although it has given me immense work on account of its extreme difficulty, interests me nevertheless in the highest degree, for it is written apparently with true inspiration – and unlike so much modern opera music, does not display in every bar the striving after effect, or effort to please. There is a great deal of the fanciful in it; a noble conception throughout and it is well written for the singers; enormously difficult it is true, and somewhat overcharged in the orchestration but full of new effects and will assuredly, when it once comes to be performed in the greater space of a theatre, be thoroughly clear and intelligible.

“The theatre rehearsals begin at the end of this week and I am exceedingly desirous to see how the fantastic subject and the still more fantastic music will come off en scène. I think I am so far correct in my judgment when I consider Wagner as the most gifted of all our dramatic composers of the present time. In this work at least, his aspirations are noble and that pleases me at a time when all depends upon creating a sensation, or in effecting the merest ear-tickling.”

When *The Dutchman* was very favourably received by the Kassel public following its première there on June 5th 1843, Spohr wrote to tell Wagner about it. This led to Wagner’s famous reply in which he said that “a lucky star has risen over me” and went on: “I have gained the sympathy of a man from whom an indulgent notice only would have been sufficient fame for me: - but to see him take the most decisive and crowning measures on my behalf is a piece of good fortune which assuredly distinguishes me above many, and which really for the first time fills me with a sentiment of pride such as hitherto no applause of the public could have awakened in me.”

Wagner recalled in his memoirs: “This happened without my seeking it, but nevertheless I feared I would remain a stranger to Spohr, as my youthful ideas could not possibly appeal to him. I was surprised and delighted when the remote and worthy Master conveyed his fullest sympathy to me in a letter, and this because he had been pleased to find in me a young artist who was really in earnest about everything pertaining to his art. Spohr, the venerated elder, was the only German kapellmeister who received me with warmth and understanding, who produced my works with all possible care, and who remained my loyal friend in every circumstance.”

We must remember that the 1843 *Dutchman* had not benefited from Wagner’s revisions of some ten years later which recast the overture and made improvements to the orchestration among other things, so we can forgive the critic, Otto Kraushaar, who reviewed the performance in the Kassel newspaper *Kasselschen Allgemeinen Zeitung* of June 12th for having mixed feelings. In his words we can sense his positive reaction to the originality and power of Wagner’s work alongside his difficulty in accepting the deviations from classical models.

He states that “the way the composer handles the work is novel, characteristic and sometimes witty but not musical in the true and deeper sense of the word. Some beautiful musical thoughts lose too much of their value because of their tonal surroundings. They follow the text in too much detail and so stand there as musical rhapsodies. Especially in the first act one can hear almost everywhere a wild, irregular roaming about through key and chords, incessant appearance of chromatic scales with scarcely a melodic ray of light gleaming through.

“The other acts have these successions of keys as well which may well produce tonal painting appropriate to the text but cannot be acceptable as a regular piece of music. Pure melody is scarce and the basic conditions of musical understanding with regard to the laws of modulation are mostly unfulfilled. What an unspeakable effort must it have cost the singers to memorise their parts.”

He goes on to point out that analysis of the works of the great composers has produced the higher laws of composition and adds: "Mr Richard Wagner does not seem to have taken the trouble to make such an analysis severely enough or he is not convinced enough of its relevance and therefore does not believe it to be worth attention. It is deplorable that a young composer gifted with such great talents, instead of taking the best compositions of all time as a model, is fully dedicated to the so-called new romantic school."

After detailing the plot of *The Flying Dutchman* the reviewer says: "This opera text differs most positively from the incoherent, misshapen nonsense, the terrible fatalism and dull accidental happenings on which so many of today's ghost and devil's operas of German and French origin are based and where, apart from the pleasure of any purely musical charms, a deep regret is produced because so much talent is wasted on such poor and pathetic inventions. Here, the elements of poetry are connected more harmoniously; ghostly and gigantic effects are produced by the imagination of adventuring seafarers in storm and fog and in the loneliness of oceanic nights; the secret bond that connects in human consciousness the world of outward phenomena with the invisible realm of a higher order."

He expands on this further before noting the climax of the "self-sacrifice for the salvation of a phantom. Add to this the serious and cheerful pictures of distress in storm and joy at landing, cheerfulness at weighing anchor, sailors' songs of all kinds, spinning-room jokes and ballads, dances and festivities of sailors and girls in front of the ghost ship whose crew stand out like silhouettes against the moonlit sky and you won't be able to complain about poor poetic accomplishment."

The review closes with some comments on the performers and the staging: "Miss Eder interpreted the part of Senta with so much intelligence and inspiration that our appreciation cannot be stated strongly enough. She expressed the abnormal and exaggerated aspects of her role in the truest possible way from her very first entrance. Mr Biberhofer fulfilled his ghostly part of the Dutchman no less pleasantly and strikingly. Mr Föppel and Mr Derska executed the brighter and livelier roles with skill. Both the machinery and scenic arrangements proved to be truly admirable; ships with full sails and rigging docked, heaved, surged to and fro, dropped and weighed anchor, turned portside and starboard and put to sea again majestically. Storm clouds, moonlight, the shining glow of transfiguration, everything happened like magic before our very eyes with easiness, deception and skill. And if ever a public demonstration of applause was justified, it was the one that demanded that the scenic manager, Mr Hoffman, join the cast on stage as well."

What is also interesting is that nowhere in the review is there any mention of Spohr's conducting or the orchestral contribution. This may seem surprising to us but it underlines the fact that Spohr had brought matters in the orchestral pit to such a high standard that its quality was taken for granted. Wolfram Boder has pointed out that Wilhelm Grimm reported to his wife after attending a performance of Rossini's *Tancredi* in Wiesbaden: "The opera was well given, actually better than in Kassel (except for the orchestra, of course)." This shows how the high quality of the orchestra had become accepted as something quite natural by the audience in Kassel, among whom, of course, were the brothers Grimm.

The impact of *The Dutchman* on Spohr cannot be over-estimated for it inspired him to return to opera composition after a 13-year gap. Following Wagner's example, Spohr himself with the help of his second wife, Marianne, wrote his own libretto based on Kotzebue's drama *The Crusaders*. Wagner's influence can also be seen in the way Spohr composed his work throughout as a "musical drama" without unnecessary repetitions of the text and without vocal ornamentation, with a constantly progressing development in the treatment.

*The Crusaders* had its première in Kassel on New Year's Day 1845 and its success saw further productions in Berlin and elsewhere but Catholic cities such as Munich and Vienna objected to the libretto and the work was not staged in these and similar centres.

In conformity with his own views on the brotherhood of man and religious toleration Spohr had added to Kotzebue's original drama to show how the Christian Crusaders were shamed by the noble behaviour of the Muslim Emir. Balduin, the hero of *The Crusaders*, had rescued the Emir's daughter when the other knights were trying to make her remove her veil so at the opera's climax it is the Emir and his soldiers who come to Balduin's rescue.

Wagner had requested *The Crusaders* for performance in Dresden where he was one of the two conductors but after a year passed without its being staged Spohr was shocked to receive his score back, worn and defaced and without the libretto. The Dresden theatre manager sent a feeble excuse for its non-production, sparking an angry reply from Spohr who, after pointing out that his opera had not been sent in for examination or trial but had been requested, declared: "The insult that has been offered to me is therefore wholly inexplicable and I must console myself with the reflection that it is the only one of the kind offered to me during my long career as a composer and I congratulate myself that I am not under a theatre directorship which so little understands how to respect the feelings of a veteran artist."

Next, Spohr wrote to Wagner to tell him that his prince had refused permission for *Tannhäuser* to be staged in Kassel and went on to inform him about the row with the Dresden management. Wagner sympathised and now the two composers planned to meet in Leipzig. Spohr's wife wrote about this meeting as follows: "We were most pleased with Wagner who seems every time more and more amiable and whose intellectual culture on every variety of subject is really wonderful. Among other things he expressed his feelings on political matters with a warmth and depth of interest that quite surprised us and pleased us, of course, the more so from the liberal sentiments he displayed.

"We passed the evening most delightfully at Mendelssohn's who did his utmost to entertain and please Spohr ... Mendelssohn himself played a most extremely difficult and highly characteristic composition of his own called *Seventeen Serious Variations* with immense effect; then followed two of Spohr's string quartets, among them the newest (A major, Op.132) – on which occasion Mendelssohn and Wagner followed the score with faces which showed their delight. Beside these, the wife of Doctor Frege sang some of Spohr's songs which Mendelssohn accompanied beautifully; and in this manner the hours passed rapidly and delightfully with alternate music and lively conversation until midnight drew on and it was time to break up. Wagner, who had to leave for Dresden next day, came to take leave of us which to both us and him was a sad moment. But after he left he was often the subject of our conversation for he left us the libretto of a new opera he had written called *Lohengrin* which is exceedingly original and interesting."

In his memoirs Wagner had this to say about Spohr: "This meeting with him did not leave me unimpressed. He was a tall, stately man, distinguished in appearance and of a serious and calm temperament. He gave me to understand, in a touching, almost apologetic manner, that the essence of his education and of his aversion to the new tendencies in music had its origin in the first impression he had received on hearing, as a very young boy, Mozart's *Magic Flute*, a work which was quite new at that time and which had a great influence on his whole life. Regarding my libretto for *Lohengrin*, which I had left behind for him to read, and the general impression which my personal acquaintance had made on him, he expressed himself with almost surprising warmth to my-brother-in-law, Hermann Brockhaus, at whose house we had been invited to dine, and where during the meal the conversation was most animated. Besides this we had met at real

musical evenings at the conductor Hauptmann's as well as at Mendelssohn's, on which occasions I heard the Master take the violin in one of his own quartets. It was precisely in these circles that I was impressed by the touching and venerable dignity of his absolutely calm demeanour."

Spohr continued to battle for a Kassel production of *Tannhäuser* and at last in 1853 he succeeded though later attempts to stage *Lohengrin* were met with point-blank refusals from the Elector. *Tannhäuser* eventually was performed on Whit Monday 1853 and Spohr says much about the work in his correspondence with Moritz Hauptmann, his former colleague in Kassel and by now cantor at St Thomas in Leipzig, the office formerly held by Bach. Spohr wrote: "We are now studying *Tannhäuser* which the Elector has at length permitted and we shall give that opera for the first time on Whit Monday. It will be staged with the greatest care and both stage decorations and costumes will be rich. There is much that is new and beautiful in the opera but much also that is most distressing to the ear. For the violins and basses it is more difficult than anything I have ever yet met with."

As rehearsals progressed and the work finally received a successful performance, Spohr again wrote to Hauptmann: "*Tannhäuser* was performed last night for the third time and again to a full house. The opera has won many admirers by virtue of its earnestness and subject matter and when I compare it with others produced in recent years I also am in this way of thinking. With much of what was at first most disagreeable to me, I have become familiarised from frequent hearing; but the want of rhythm and the frequent absence of rounded periods is still to me very objectionable. The manner in which it is performed here is really very fine and in few places in Germany could be heard with such precision.

"In the enormously difficult ensembles of the singers in the second act, not one single note was omitted last night. But with all that, in several parts these assume a shape which produce horrifying music, particularly just before the part where Elizabeth throws herself upon the singers who rush upon *Tannhäuser*. What faces would Haydn and Mozart make if they had to hear the stunning noise that is now given to us for music! The choruses of pilgrims (which here are supported by clarinets and bassoons, *p*) were so pure in their intonation last night that I became somewhat reconciled for the first time to their unnatural modulations. It is astonishing what the human ear will by degrees become accustomed to."

Despite Spohr's reservations, it did not dampen his enthusiastic desire to become acquainted with *Lohengrin* so that, in spite of the Elector's refusal to have this opera produced in Kassel, Spohr planned to include extracts from it in his winter subscription concerts. He again wrote to Hauptmann: "If you wish to give us pleasure by sending something for our winter concerts, let me ask for the music to *Lohengrin*. I was in correspondence with Wagner this summer and he knows I am exerting myself trying to get his opera on the stage here so he will not object to a performance of some scenes from it beforehand." However, despite all his efforts Spohr was never to hear a complete performance of *Lohengrin*.

Whereas Spohr's conservative musical colleagues had no time for Wagner, as we have seen Spohr himself had persevered in coming to terms with the music. For instance, Moritz Hauptmann quoted with approval a wit's comment that Wagner was greater than both Beethoven and Goethe – "he writes better poetry than Beethoven and better music than Goethe".

The question remains over how much Wagner was influenced by Spohr's music. Many commentators have pointed to Spohr's use of chromaticism marking the path towards Wagner and Spohr's operas can certainly be grouped with those of Weber, Marschner and Lortzing as forming the general background from which Wagner emerged.

Quite a number of more specific influences have been pointed out. Gerald Abraham, who back in 1938 had announced "Spohr's music is dead", noted in his booklet accompanying EMI's

History of Music in Sound extract from *Jessonda* in 1958: "When Nadori comes forward at the beginning of the recorded excerpt, to announce imminent death to Jessonda, Spohr uses precisely the same means of creating tension (notably the drum rhythm) as the mature Wagner was to use thirty years later when Brünnhilde announces imminent death to Siegmund in the Second Act of *Die Walküre*. When Amazili wonders 'ob Mitleid ihn erweicht?', Spohr sets 'ihn erweicht?' to the universal 'questioning motive' of romantic music, and the quasi-polyphony at 'Heil mir!' foreshadows that of *Die Meistersinger*".

In his 1912 dissertation on Spohr's chamber music for strings, Hans Glenewinkel gives details of a number of passages where Spohr features pre-echoes of Wagner, one example being in the String Quartet in A minor, Op.74, No.1 where the terse figure which opens the work assumes various forms, one of which points to the lamentations of the Nibelungen in *Das Rheingold*. Another one is in the Quartet Op.82, No.3, also in A minor, where part of the opening theme shows similarities to King Mark's motif from *Tristan und Isolde*.

How much of this is a direct influence and how much a general one based on the overall style of Spohr's music is a moot point but it can be stated with certainty that the *Jessonda* example given by Gerald Abraham was well known to Wagner for he conducted this Spohr opera on many occasions.

We have seen how Spohr battled to have Wagner's operas staged in Kassel and succeeded with *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*. In return it appears that Wagner was not so assiduous in promoting Spohr's music though, of course, he was in a less powerful position to do so and indeed had much less necessity to as Spohr was a "core repertoire" composer in Germany and England at that time. In the case of the row over the Dresden rejection of Spohr's *Crusaders*, one wonders how much Wagner tried to influence his theatre management in favour of the work or, in fact, whether he could be bothered to do so.

However, when engaged as conductor of the Philharmonic Society concerts in London in the summer of 1855 Wagner did include a number of pieces by Spohr in his programmes though no doubt Spohr's high popularity in England ensured that the Society was the major force behind this fact. Wagner conducted Spohr's Third Symphony, *Der Berggeist* overture, the Eighth Violin Concerto with Ernst as soloist, and arias from *Faust* and *Jessonda*.

In later life Wagner is known to have made disparaging comments about some of Spohr's music but that might just be the normal reaction of younger artists against the previous generation which is quite commonplace.

Certainly, his tribute on hearing of Spohr's death seems sincere and eloquent: "I leave it to the world to estimate what an abundant power and noble productivity is lost to us by the Master's death. It reminds me, to my sorrow, that now the last has gone of the line of genuine serious musicians whose youthful days were directly illuminated by the radiant sun of Mozart ... if I with one stroke of my pen had to put down what has impressed me so unforgettably about Spohr, I would say: He was a serious, honest, master of his art."