

A NEW PORTRAIT OF SPOHR

by Keith Warsop

THE Royal Academy of Music has been bequeathed a previously unknown portrait of Spohr which the Collections Registrar, Janet Snowman, took immediately to a conservator when they received the portrait in June 2008 as some of the paint was falling off the canvas. When it was returned to the Academy during August suitably restored it was hung in their museum as part of an exhibition on Viotti and the Revolutionary Violin.

At the age of fifteen Spohr was employed by the Duke of Brunswick as Kammermusicus in the ducal orchestra and the young musician's studies were sponsored by the Duke until he moved to Gotha to take up the post of orchestral director there in the autumn of 1805.

Brunswick was connected to the British throne through the Electorate of Hanover until 1837 and the death of William IV. Duke Carl Wilhelm Ferdinand (1735-1806) of Brunswick was married to Augusta, sister of George III, king of Great Britain and Elector of Hanover. The national anthem of the Duchy of Brunswick, "Heil unserm Herzog, Heil!", shared the same melody as the British one, namely "God Save the King".

The portrait would appear to show Spohr in his late teens while he was still sponsored by the Duke and this is possibly the explanation for the very prominent and readily identifiable appearance in the portrait of this melody which Spohr is shown writing down.

This is now the earliest known portrait of Spohr, the previous ones being the composer's own self-portraits of 1807 and 1808 which have been reproduced many times. However, we know of at least one earlier painting.

In his Autobiography Spohr includes extracts from the diaries he kept during his study trip to St Petersburg with the violin virtuoso Franz Eck in 1802-03 and he mentions there that when they were in Hamburg on their outward journey he had completed a self-portrait which he was sending home to his parents in Germany.

His entry for May 12th 1802 reads: "On Sunday I commenced a miniature which I finished this forenoon. I tried to paint myself and am quite satisfied with the result. This, and playing on the violin, have occupied me so fully that I have not left the house for four days. I sent this picture to my parents and then commenced painting Herr Eck who was patient enough to sit for me."

However, as can be seen from this extract, he states that he had painted a miniature whereas the one left to the Academy is much larger, some 27 inches by 20. So, unless Spohr's parents had a larger copy made, we are looking at a different painting here which could be either by Spohr himself or another artist.

Apart from being hung in the museum, this portrait has also been placed on the Royal Academy website where it can be seen at www.ram.ac.uk/apollo. From there the quickest access to the portrait is to search "apollo".

The bequest came to the Academy in the will of Dr Joanna Richardson who died on March 7th 2008 aged 82. Her obituary in the *Daily Telegraph* summed up her career by saying she "was a translator and literary critic and a prolific biographer of major figures of nineteenth and early twentieth century French and English literature; she also became in 1989 the first non-French winner of the Prix Goncourt, one of the highest literary awards in France."

Her English translations of the poems of Baudelaire and Verlaine are considered her greatest literary achievement though she launched her career in 1952 with a biography of Fanny Brawne,

the muse of the poet John Keats and she also unearthed the first known likeness of Fanny so that her interest in portraiture probably explains her acquisition of the one of Spohr.

At the moment the provenance of the portrait and indeed its attribution as being of Spohr are both still under investigation. A label on the back of the frame merely identifies it as "Oil painting – late 18th Century French School. Portrait of a Musician" and this label is on a letter heading which shows the dealer as "C.Rich & Son Ltd. Oil Paintings. 24 St Christopher's Place, Wigmore Street, London W.1. Telephone WELbeck 6494."

Presumably Dr Richardson acquired the portrait from this dealer some time in the 1950s or 1960s. In her will leaving it to the Royal Academy she specifies that the portrait is of Spohr and the features of the musician portrayed match very closely those on the previously known self-portraits, particularly the nose, the eyes, the eyebrows, the lips with the "rosebud" effect on the upper one, and the indentations each side of the lips.

Dr Richardson's obituary notices mention her "obsessive attention to detail" and she once described the purpose of biography as a search for truth. In pursuit of her quarry she would never take 'no' for an answer. In view of this adherence to detailed research it is unlikely that Dr Richardson would have identified the "musician" in the portrait as being Spohr unless she had investigated the matter fully.

So the attribution to Spohr would seem to be in little doubt but it would still be of interest to learn more about the pedigree of this portrait, who the painter was and through whose hands it passed in its 200 years or so of existence. Dr Richardson's executors still have to complete their work of sorting through her papers so let us hope that more will be uncovered in due course.

If this is a genuine portrait of Spohr then it is the third such discovery since Herfried Homburg published his catalogue of known Spohr portraits in 1984¹. In the late 1980s a lithographic engraving of Spohr aged around 25 was acquired by Herr Homburg. It is by M.Backofen and is thought to date from before 1810.

Then in 2005 another new Spohr portrait was bequeathed to Mrs Veronica Jacobs of New York. She and her husband, Dr Bertrand Jacobs, had been long-time customers of the English music antiquarian Albi Rosenthal and they had admired this portrait which hung in his study. To their surprise, when Mr Rosenthal died, they discovered that he had left the Spohr portrait to them and they took possession of it in October 2005.

Upon examination it proved to be previously uncatalogued and unknown. Spohr himself had signed the portrait with the date of July 1849 and at the foot of the painting are a few words in almost undecipherable pencil but one of the words is quite clearly "Horsley".

William Horsley was among Spohr's closest English friends and on his visits to England the composer would relax with the Horsley family when he needed a rest from his arduous round of music-making. In 1847 Horsley was one of the principal organisers of a big Spohr festival in London so perhaps this portrait was sent as a special "thank-you" present for him. We hope that in the future more will come to light on this portrait and that both it and the one now with the Royal Academy will be reproduced and published.

Note

1 *Bildnisse Louis Spohrs: Eine vorläufige Bestandsaufnahme*, in *Louis Spohr: Festschrift und Ausstellungskatalog zum 200. Geburtstag*, Kassel 1984.