

SPOHR AND THE ORGAN

by Philip L.Scowcroft

WE DO NOT usually associate Louis Spohr with “the king of instruments” but it was common, well into the 20th century, to hear organ transcriptions of much orchestral (and other) music and by many composers because in those days there were fewer orchestral concerts than we have now and until the 1920s there were relatively few orchestral gramophone records. Such music was commonly heard either in arrangements for piano duet or for organ.

I have considered Spohr’s organ transcriptions on two previous occasions¹. Another article outlined as many Spohr performances in Doncaster as I could then find², but none of these were for organ solo, though some of the choral works listed would probably have had organ accompaniment. I can now add one or two examples of Spohr on the organ, all from Doncaster.

The first was on 11th July 1888, on the occasion when the organ of St Mary’s Church, Wheatley³, was opened; by E.H.Turpin, Organist of St Brides’, Fleet Street, Hon. Secretary of the College of Organists and, incidentally, a useful composer and arranger. His programme included Spohr’s Variations, Op.34, arranged for organ, possibly by William Spark as he had probably published an arrangement of it in 1876 (see Notes 1 and 4).

I fast forward to the 1920s and the St Jude’s Hexthorpe, whose choir included at its Choir Festival on 18th November 1923 a Spohr “anthem” and to quote a newspaper report the celebrations also included “organ music selected from Spohr”. We have no details as to what music or as to whose transcriptions thereof were used, but we would not be surprised if they did not draw on William Spark even if it was almost fifty years since he had published his versions⁴.

Is there not mileage in recording some of these transcriptions, period pieces though they are?

Notes

- 1 Spohr Journal 8, pp 3-5, which lists a late 19th century recital programme devoted entirely to Spohr by William Spark (1823-97), Organist at Leeds Town Hall, and comprising the *Jessonda* overture and selections from *The Last Judgment*, *Jessonda*, *Calvary* and the “Grand Symphony, *The Power of Sound*”, plus the *Adagio* in A flat from Op.34 [a piece from Spohr’s Notturmo arranged for a variety of instruments]. One may assume, I think, that the transcriptions or most of them, at least, are by Spark himself. A later article of mine (Spohr Journal 22, p 11) alludes to a “favourite arrangement from Spohr’s *Faust*”, published in September 1876 as one of *Short Pieces for Organ*.
- 2 Spohr Journal 8, pp 5-6.
- 3 On a personal note, the writer was married in that church in November 1959.
- 4 There are many other organ transcriptions of Spohr. The following examples, which are, I feel sure, by no means exhaustive, are taken from the BBC Catalogue of Music, circa 1980. The lion’s share came from the late Victorian Liverpool organist W.T.Best, who must have more transcriptions for organ than anybody else. For Spohr he did the overture and final chorus from *The Fall of Babylon*, the overture to *Jessonda*, *God Thou Art Great*, the overture and “Holy, Holy” from *The Last Judgment*, the March, Minuet, *Andante*, Polacca, *Adagio* and Finale from the Notturmo, Op.34, the Overture No.2 (*Die Prüfung*), Psalm 8, Psalm 130, part of the String Quartet in C, Op.4, No.1, the *Larghetto* from Symphony No.1, Op.20 and the *Andantino* from Symphony No.4, Op.86. Other pieces of Spohr “dished up” for organ are Barcarolle, Op.135, No.1, by John Westbrook, the overture to *Calvary* by one Cruickshank, the Sinfonia to Part II of *The Last Judgment* by Sir John Stainer (1840-1901), no less, and, also from *The Last Judgment*, “Praise His Awful Name” by E.J.Hopkins, Organist of the Temple Church, and “All Glory to the Lamb” by John Ebenezer West of Novello. More recently, there is James Brown’s transcription of the *Adagio* from Op.34, probably Spohr’s most-arranged work.