

# SPOHR: A FOREWORD AND A PREFACE

## Introduction

THE ORIGINAL 1984 publication of Clive Brown's study *Louis Spohr. A Critical Biography* did not have a foreword but more recently he wrote one for Wolfram Boder's German translation of the book which was published in 2009. As this foreword includes some fascinating comments which we feel sure are of wider interest than just to German readers, Professor Brown has kindly allowed us to publish his own English version.

Our second contribution could not be more different and is separated from Professor Brown's foreword by 144 years. It is the preface written by the anonymous translator of the 1865 English edition of *Louis Spohr's Autobiography*, the German version of which was published in 1860/61. This preface is invaluable because it reveals clearly the reverence with which Spohr was held in England at that time and is thus an important document in the reception history of the man and his music.

## Foreword to *Louis Spohr. Eine kritische Biographie* by Clive Brown

MY INTEREST in Spohr arose more than 30 years ago when I read the entry on him in the fifth edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1954), then the most recent edition of that iconic reference work.

The long article, which was a slightly abridged version of the original entry from the first edition (volume four, 1889), conveyed the impression of a composer of major importance, scarcely less significant than the great composers of the canon. And on an old Novello edition I noticed that his name was one of the eight included in the decorative border on the front cover along with Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Weber and Mendelssohn. Yet in the 1970s Spohr and his works had long been relegated to the lumber room of musical history; in the prevailing view of the nineteenth century he played no significant part either as a composer or as an influence. My curiosity was roused. At that time very few of Spohr's works were available as commercial recordings, or as easily obtainable scores, but what I was able to hear and read quickly convinced me that here was a significant composer of remarkable individuality and that the almost total neglect not only of his music, but also of his historical position was a major conundrum to be investigated.

Anniversaries often provide opportunities for reappraisal, and the centenary of Spohr's death in 1959 had aroused modest interest. In Britain some of his works were broadcast on the BBC and Dorothy Moulton Mayer published *The Forgotten Master. The Life and Times of Louis Spohr*. In Germany a number of scholars contributed to a *Louis-Spohr-Festschrift* published in Weimar, while others (Folker Göthel, Herfried Homburg, Horst Heussner) published individual articles on various aspects of Spohr's life and works.

The next couple of decades saw the appearance of several dissertations and published studies of the composer. Among the most significant of these were Göthel's scholarly edition of Spohr's reminiscences as *Lebenserinnerungen* (1968) and his magisterial *Thematisch-bibliographisches Verzeichnis der Werke von Louis Spohr* (1981).

The bicentenary of Spohr's birth encouraged further research and since that time important contributions to our understanding of the composer and his works have continued to appear, including recently Simon Moser's book *Das Liedschaffen Louis Spohrs* and Wolfram Boder's study *Die Kasseler Opern Louis Spohrs*. The last 25 years of scholarship has been taken into account in revising this book for publication in a German translation. Some small changes have also been made to correct deficiencies in the original text. I have not felt it necessary to revise

my views in general, but a few opinions on particular works have been modified in the light of the greater availability of scores and recordings.

The situation with regard to recordings of Spohr's music during the last quarter century has been even more dramatic than the steady stream of scholarship. At the time this book was originally published only a tiny proportion of Spohr's music had been recorded and an even smaller amount was to be heard in live performances. In Oxford, where I was working during the 1980s, I conducted or led several of Spohr's works, including *Jessonda* (a staged production), *Die letzten Dinge*, the Second Symphony, the Sextet, Op.140, the Quintet, Op.33, No.2, and several string quartets and piano trios. I also encouraged the BBC to broadcast the Seventh Symphony and University College Opera (London) to stage *Faust* in the 1852 version.

Yet even in my most optimistic moments I never expected to have the opportunity of hearing almost all Spohr's major works professionally performed. The fact that, apart from a few of his operas, they are now available in commercial recordings, several of them in multiple versions, reflects to a large extent the exigencies of the recording industry, especially in the last 20 years, when technological changes made it commercially advantageous to respond to niche markets.

It is also an indication of our changing attitudes to the musical canon. The idea that only works by the canonical figures of musical history, sanctified by generations of performers and musicologists as 'great music', deserve to be heard and studied has been increasingly questioned, and it is no longer unthinkable to invite comparison between Spohr's music and that of Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn or Schumann.

Despite the availability of recordings, however, it is questionable whether Spohr's music has yet, except in isolated instances, been heard to its best advantage. He himself was convinced that only a performance that was faithful to the meaning and spirit of his notation could do justice to his compositions, and it is clear that many modern performers fail to understand what his very refined and careful notation was intended to convey.

The key to performing Spohr's works in the manner he expected is to be found in the detailed instructions in his *Violinschule* (1833), but very few present-day musicians have given this crucial text even a cursory glance before tackling them, and the majority of these performances are consequently lacking in the style and character necessary to convey their finer qualities. Performed in the manner Spohr intended, his music has quite a different impact, and only in these circumstances can its worth be fully appreciated. It is impossible to do justice to his works if we are unaware, for instance, that staccato marks may not indicate any significant shortening of the notes, or that the use of portamento (indicated by many of his fingerings in string works), ornamental vibrato and tempo rubato is essential to the achievement of what he calls in his *Violinschule* a 'fine style'. The project for the next quarter century may be to rediscover the expectations behind Spohr's notation and to apply this knowledge to the interpretations of his music. Only then can we make a proper estimation of the significance of his contribution to our musical inheritance.

#### **Preface to *Louis Spohr's Autobiography* by the anonymous translator**

IN PUBLISHING an English translation of the unadorned yet highly interesting Autobiography of the celebrated Violinist and great Composer *Louis Spohr*, we consider we are but satisfying a natural desire on the part of his many admirers in this country to become more intimately acquainted with both the public and private life of this great musical genius – this noble, manly character, in whom were combined in so high a degree the qualities of the true artist with those of the really great-minded and thoroughly good man.

Although nearly twelve years have elapsed since *Spohr's* last appearance in England, and during that time numberless foreign artists of distinction have visited us and gathered well-earned

laurels and golden opinions in these islands; yet still above all *Spohr* shines out as a star of the first magnitude, and there are no doubt thousands yet amongst us who were present at the performance of his oratorios, under his direction, at Norwich, or attended his concerts in London, and to whom this Autobiography will be of interest. We have little to say of it here – it speaks for itself. Simple and truthful throughout, it is a mirror of the mind of him who jotted down the details composing the same. Modest and unassuming at the commencement of his career, *Spohr* continued so till the end, notwithstanding the celebrity he achieved and the high position to which he attained. The praises showered upon him neither turned his brain nor puffed him up with pride; and he has left us an example of high morality, great amiability, and bright domestic virtues, too rare alas! among artists and men of genius.

*Spohr* was a man devoted to his art, and although far from wealthy, often sacrificed his time – which to him, as to most of us, was money – in giving gratuitous instruction to young men of ability too poor to pay for lessons; and not unfrequently has he unhesitatingly dismissed some rich, well-paying, but dull scholar to make way for a poor but talented pupil, in hopes of thereby benefitting his art – and this was his sole reward.

Another prominent trait in *Spohr's* character was his childlike simplicity, combined with never-failing good-nature and an inability to bear malice. Nor did the many unavoidable trials and vexations of a long life ever permanently disturb his good humour or sour his temper; and even gross injustice failed to do more than temporarily ruffle the calm serenity of his soul. Thus he passed through the world, an active and highly useful member of society, beloved and respected by all who knew him, till in process of time he went down to his grave full of years and honour.

As is explained in the text, the Autobiography comes to an end with the month of June 1838; but the description of the life and doings of the great master from that date till the time of his death was continued from reliable materials furnished by Mrs *Spohr* and other members of the family; so that the whole forms a true account and lively picture of *Spohr's* earthly career from his cradle to his grave.

With these few remarks we submit the work to the perusal and kind considerations of the gentle reader.

*London, October 1864.*

### **Bibliography**

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