

SPOHR'S DER BERGGEIST — A CONTEMPORARY REVIEW

Spohr's opera Der Berggeist received its first performance on 24 March 1825 in Cassel and was reported on in the September issue of the English music magazine The Harmonicon. A few obvious errors in the original have been silently corrected though the nineteenth century German form of Cassel has been retained.

THIS opera was produced in Cassel to celebrate the nuptials of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen with the daughter of the Elector of Hesse Cassel. The poem is by the well-known G. Döring and possesses great merit; it abounds with those situations which are well calculated to animate the genius of a composer. As the poem describes the world of spirits, Spohr has endeavoured, and we think successfully, to impart to his music that mysterious character which is in unison with the sentiments of the piece.

He appears throughout the whole to have wisely borne in mind that the love of men and the love of spiritual beings require a very different character and tone of music; and accordingly the feelings of these unearthly beings are expressed in sounds which, though impassioned, have a certain definite character and leave much to the imagination to supply.

This composer in the powerful music of his *Faust*; in the tender strains of his *Zemire*; and the deep feeling of his *Jessonda* has already displayed the variety of his talent; the present opera will show him in another, but not less praiseworthy, point of view. The design is well conceived and full of invention; the contrasts of the tender and the terrible are in the highest degree striking and yet the unity of the whole is sustained in a masterly manner throughout. The recitative is admirable, but particularly in those places where cantabile is required.

In this, as in his former operas, Spohr has proved how great a command he possesses of instrumentation and the powers of harmony; but in no other opera has he shown such a wise economy of accompaniments so that the song is nowhere oppressed but admirably supported and allowed freely to develop all its beauties.

In the overture, which begins with a novel subject characteristic of a march and advances with a copiousness of rich ideas, the most important features of the opera are portrayed without being distorted and exaggerated, as is the case in so many compositions of this kind. The contrasts of opposing feelings are powerfully depicted till, at the conclusion, the bursting sounds of jubilee announce the victory which forms the catastrophe of the piece.

This is followed by a chorus of spirits of a highly original character; a subterranean scene lighted by a fire in the centre displays them ranged in groups around. Troll, one of the spirits of the earth, appears; he is the favourite of the great Mountain Spirit but is dissatisfied at the eternal toil and labours endured in the bowels of the earth and speaks in praise of the destiny of men who are permitted to enjoy the light of heaven and walk the airy surface and to whom, in days of old, it was permitted them to pay a visit.

The recitative of Troll and of the others is here admirably managed. The inquiries of the spirits, their anxious curiosity to know something of the unknown upper world, are marked with great genius and character. An air of Troll which follows is full of beauty and mingled with a certain humour that distinguishes all the songs of this spirit. When Troll pronounces the word "love", the Mountain Spirit, who has till now sat in a gloomy and abstracted attitude, starts from

his throne. This moment of the piece is expressed by the music with great strength and truth. Everyone feels and acknowledges that at this instant the life-spark of the whole action is kindled and will soon burst into a flame. This is still more strongly expressed in the duet between the Mountain Spirit and Troll which is taken up by a chorus, and by the life and freshness which it breathes is truly admirable, concluding the first scene with great effect.

The scene changes and a rustic chorus follows of the female attendants of Alma, the bride of Prince Oscar who has just returned triumphant from the war. The recitative of Alma which succeeds is full of passion, tenderness and the consciousness of a love which meets return. This is followed by a duet between Alma and Oscar, graceful and rich in melody. This leads to a very effective *terzetto* between the lovers and the father who now first makes his appearance. It is in part without accompaniment and, independently of its merits, in a melodical point of view, is distinguished by a peculiar management of the voices.

After this comes a situation of the highest dramatic effect in which the composer appears in his native worth as a great and original artist. Alma is seen alone, meditating on her approaching happiness; but is suddenly aroused from this reverie of delight by a shuddering which seizes her whole frame, caused by the approach of the spirits. She struggles against this feeling but in vain; she attempts to quit the place but remains fixed, as if spellbound, to the spot. The intrinsic value of the melodies in the air which she sings in this situation, the horror excited by the gradual approach of the spirits and at last the burst of terror at the appearance of the Mountain Spirit, produce an effect which it would not be easy to describe.

An increasing energy of feeling, a deepening interest in the scene, a continually progressive beauty of the harmonies and melodies, and great truth of expression, reign in the subsequent finale, in which Alma is transported by the Mountain Spirit to his subterranean abode, while the bridegroom, her father and friends are seen bewailing her fate in fruitless grief, and venting their fruitless rage on the malignity of the Mountain Spirit.

In the second act we find Alma in the subterranean empire, in the power of the Mountain Spirit. On her returning to herself, he attempts with soft words to soothe the terrors of the maiden; he avows his passion and entreats her to yield him her heart in return. But his gentle expressions cannot hide the malignity of his nature; Alma is at first all terror; but at length she acquires confidence, aware that her only means of gaining time is to pretend to be moved by the tenderness of his professions.

The composer has in the first duet of this act admirably expressed the contrasted feelings of the two characters; the situation is new but Spohr has evinced the versatility of his genius. For depth of sentiment and happy discrimination of character we consider this duet as one of the most original compositions of the whole opera.

Alma expresses a wish to see her friends who are upon earth and asks as an only boon that she may be allowed to have them occasionally near her. The Mountain Spirit gives her the power to call up men by means of certain magical flowers which Troll is commissioned to procure. Alma dare not venture to summon before her the forms of her bridegroom or her father but she commands her friend and companion, Ludmilla, to appear, that from her she may learn tidings of those she holds dear.

In the following scene between Alma and the shade of Ludmilla, the composer has again shown himself a master who has command of the brightest and most original fancies. The colourless song of the shade, composed of a few simple chords, opposed to Alma's deep-felt and glowing sensibility, is productive of an effect more easily imagined than described. Afterwards Alma calls up other forms and a recitative and chorus which follow are of the same extraordinary and mysterious character. A duet succeeds between Troll and the shade of Ludmilla in which he

declares to her his love. The amorous professions of the whimsical spirit, blended as they are with his characteristic gaiety, his anger at the indifference shown by the shade, afford the composer an ample field for the display of his versatile talent and he has not failed to profit by it accordingly. The melodic beauties and harmonic conduct of this part of the opera is altogether worthy of the master.

After the duet the scene changes; Oscar, the unhappy bridegroom, is discovered wandering in a mountain scene in search of his lost love and calling in rage on the daring ravisher to restore his victim. The air which he sings on this occasion is of the most impassioned kind and highly expressive of the stormy feeling that rend his soul. Of the duet that follows between Oscar and the father, Domoslav, though it contains many beauties, yet it cannot be denied that it is too long and might have been concentrated with advantage.

The second act concludes with a festivity given by the Mountain Spirit in honour of the beautiful daughter of the earth who graces his subterranean abode, and affords the composer an occasion for a display of truly dramatic character in which the music of the dances is of the most enlivening and characteristic kind; while at the same time the wild and savage character of the scene is not forgotten but breaks through the sweeter melodies.

The third act opens with a recitative and air of Alma, full of spirit and feeling; a *terzetto* follows between Alma, Troll and the Mountain Spirit which terminates in a chorus of great effect. Meantime Troll, dissatisfied with the mere shade of his beloved Ludmilla, makes a journey by stealth to earth and brings back with him the real female friend of Alma. The joy of these two friends on their meeting is charmingly expressed in a duet of great tenderness.

The two females are now together and they contrive to obtain the spell by which Troll effected his passage to the upper regions of earth. The Mountain Spirit gains intelligence of the flight and pursues them amid thunders and lightnings. He arrives; terrible appearances precede him; an earthquake shakes the ground and the rocks are rent asunder. In depicting all this in tones, the genius of Spohr soars into the true sublime and the author of *Faust*, *Zemire* and *Jessonda* adds fresh laurels to his wreath.

At this moment the Mountain Spirit receives an admonition from a superior power and becoming sensible of having degraded his superior nature by an attachment to a daughter of earth, yields Alma to the arms of her lover. The whole of this conclusion is of the same lofty tone and character as the rest of the piece, full of sweet melodies combined with harmonies of great power and effect.

We feel assured that great as is the fame of M. Spohr, this composition will tend to augment it. It is delightful to see how rapidly many of the later compositions of the German school are making their way through Europe and dividing that attention which was before too exclusively directed to the lighter compositions of the Italian school; and we do not hesitate to say that the present opera is as worthy of distinction as several of its rivals of the same school.

Cassel, June, 1825. J.T.H.