

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LOUIS-SPOHR-GES. LL.

by

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The history of the L-S-G, comparatively brief in its span of a little over 60 years, is nevertheless a story of great endeavour. The enthusiasm of the early advocates and their belief in the value of Spohr's music; the struggle for recognition and then for survival against Nazi treachery; the re-forming of the society, the recent re-organisation and expansion are the main elements of the story which, I think you will agree, is a fascinating one.

Spohr's name has always been inseparably linked with Kassel, the German town where from 1822 until 1857, he was Hofkapellmeister. Situated on the river Fulda in a large basin surrounded by the beautiful wooded hills of Hesse, Kassel has a rich cultural history. Spohr added a significant chapter to this heritage by transforming what was a small provincial musical centre into a leading musical centre with a flourishing opera, and one of the finest orchestras in Germany. It was in Kassel, in 1908, that a group of musicians and men of letters decided to try and revive interest in Spohr and his music. The Spohr Society was founded, but plans for an archive, whilst not actively opposed, were met with indifference. Justification was demanded even for the collection of a few Spohr "souvenirs" housed in the Court Theater.

It seems strange to us now that the citizens of Kassel should have been so apathetic towards "their" composer, but it must be remembered that by the turn of the century the musical world in general had half forgotten Spohr, and he was about as neglected as a once famous composer could be. A new musical era was dawning; in Germany it was the time of the pilgrimages to Bayreuth. For many years the memory of Spohr was kept alive by a few devotees, but before much more could be done events took a turn for the worse. In 1934 the worthy efforts of the society fell victim to the Nazi regime; Spohr's name was discredited, his music, and the society, banned. The official reason was that the work of the society was being financed by idealists, men who were later forced to wear the yellow star of David. There were certainly other reasons, probably connected with the hideous and far-reaching Nazi cultural policy. Perhaps Spohr's strong liberal politics, or the fact that he was a Freemason, and included amongst his friends Jewish composers such as Mendelssohn, Moscheles and Meyerbeer?

In 1954 the eminent Romantic scholar Franz Uhlendorf gathered around him a circle of enthusiasts with the intention of re-forming the society. With the help and encouragement of the Kassel publicist Herfried Homburg, an archive was founded; the basis of the present day Louis-Spohr-Gedenk-und-Forschungsstatte. Herr Homburg is today the secretary of the International Spohr Society, and curator of the Spohr Archive. The plan was to collect as much 'Spohriana' as possible, and also material relating to violins and violinists thus paying homage to the fact that Spohr founded the last great German school of violin playing.

At present the Spohr-Archiv is situated on the top floor of Kassel's Murhard Library in the Bruder-Grimm-Platz, and consists of one large room and one very much smaller room. The collection comprises display cases containing manuscripts, letters, diaries, note-books, concert hand-bills, photographs, sketches and small portraits. Around the walls are portraits of Spohr, his two wives, his three daughters, his parents, friends, contemporary composers, his pupils and the many eminent artists and writers, poets and philosophers who were his colleagues. A hitherto unknown pencil portrait of Mendelssohn, and a beautiful wax relief in orange of Paganini presented to Spohr by his one-time rival are amongst the rare and valuable exhibits to be found in the archive. Also displayed in the large room are items of furniture from Spohr's Kassel home including his desk, a chair, a small cabinet and his piano built by Johann Andreus Streicher and played on by many famous composers and pianists: Hummel, Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer, Moscheles, Liszt, Clara Schumann and many others who visited Spohr in Kassel.

In the smaller of the two rooms the bulk of the society's collection of manuscripts and scores is kept. Many editions of Spohr's works are to be found there. The archive also possesses most of Spohr's works on microfilm. The entire collection is valued at 1,000,000 Marks. A good deal of genuine musical cultural history can be re-lived in the Spohr-Archiv, and many of the exhibits can be seen in Herr Homburg's book: LOUIS SPOHR - BILDER UND DOKUMENTE, a pictorial life of Spohr based on the archive collection. (Available from Spohr Soc. Gt. Britain). But on to more recent events.

In July 1970, the Lord Mayor of Kassel, Dr. Karl Branner, proposed that the Spohr Archive be transferred to the more spacious apartments in the Schloss Bellevue, one of Kassel's town palaces, in the once fashionable Schone Aussicht. Spohr lived for a time in this broad avenue overlooking the parklands and the river Fulda. The entire first floor was being made available, comprising five rooms, as the city's art collection was to be moved to the Kassel National Gallery. At a council meeting shortly afterwards Councillor Wolfgang Windfuhr further urged that the Spohr Society be offered the five rooms as other German towns connected with Spohr: Seesen, where Spohr's father was district physician during his early years; Gendersheim, where his parents lived for many years, and Brunswick where he was born, had also proposed sites. Kassel offered the most attractive proposition, however, and thus the Archive was saved for the town Spohr served so well. The Society moves to the new premises during the first quarter of 1972.

It was also in 1970 that Herr Homburg and Dr. Branner visited Spohr's birthplace in Brunswick. The building was in a dilapidated condition, but the private owner was anxious to see it renovated, and a room set aside as a memorial. A grant was made available from the city's monuments' department, and plans went ahead. The Spohr house was officially opened to the public in October this year (see report in the Nov/Dec newsletter); furniture and other exhibits - manuscripts and portraits - were installed in the memorial room. Any possible competition between the two towns has been avoided; Brunswick will remember Spohr's early years, Kassel, his life's work.

1970 was indeed a productive year for in October there met in Kassel the General Assembly of the Louis-Spohr-Gesellschaft. The Spohr Society of Great Britain had been founded in 1969, and in view of the importance of our work and the rapid growth of our society, it was decided to re-constitute the L-S-G as the INTERNATIONAL LOUIS SPOHR SOCIETY. The Spohr Society of Great Britain then became the British, or more accurately, the English speaking section of the international society. We, of course, run our own internal affairs whilst adopting the general policies of the Praesidium of the international society, publish our own Journal and newsletters many of which are sent abroad. It is hoped that other 'sections' will be formed in the world's major musical centres.

The work of the Society in Kassel is chiefly concerned with maintaining the archive, collecting Spohr material, and publishing new additions to its NEUE AUSWAHL DER WERKE (New selected edition of the works) series. Our society is actively collecting material for its own archive (at present temporarily privately housed), and researching into the lives and work of many of Spohr's important contemporaries. The first resolution passed by the newly-formed international society at its general meeting in October 1970, was to aid in every way possible the establishing of a permanent Spohr Archive in London. This is

our prime objective.