

# SPOHR, KUHLAU, FARRENC AND 'JESSONDA'

by Karl Traugott Goldbach

IN A FORMER issue of this Journal, Philip L. Scowcroft pointed to some similarities between some chamber works of Louise Farrenc and Louis Spohr, especially the nonets of both composers<sup>1</sup>. It is very likely that Farrenc knew Spohr's Nonet in F major, Op.31, of 1813 when she wrote her own in 1849. But there is a gap of more than three decades between the two works, a time with a rapid diversification of ideas about music. So what do we know about the relationship of both composers?

In 1844 Spohr decided to make his "customary summer journey" to Paris this year "in order to show his wife the grandeur of that brilliant capital and to visit at the same time the international exhibition of industry"<sup>2</sup>. As on all his journeys Spohr met a lot of musicians. On July 2 his wife Marianne wrote in her diary: "In the morning again various visits, among them Mr Farrenc with his musical wife and daughter, quite agreeable. They invited us to pass a musical evening."<sup>3</sup>

It is astonishing that Marianne Spohr announced Louise Farrenc as just the wife of Aristide Farrenc, although at the time Louise had been professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire for two years. Maybe the Spohrs would have a more detailed opinion about the Farrencs if they ever participated in a soirée at this family home and we would know more about it.

But another eminent composer of the nineteenth century links Spohr with Farrenc. The Denmark-based Friedrich Kuhlau, born in 1786 in Uelzen, attended the same school in Brunswick as Spohr, the Katharineum. But they were there at different times, however, for Spohr left it before 1799 when he became a member of the Brunswick court orchestra<sup>4</sup>, while Kuhlau was educated there in 1802/03<sup>5</sup>. Kuhlau was not a violinist like Spohr but played the flute and so about a quarter of his compositions are for flute. This was of interest to Aristide Farrenc who was not just a flautist himself but also a music publisher. In a letter from March 14, 1830, Kuhlau announced to Farrenc: "I started for you: Op.101 Variations for flute and piano on a very lovely theme from L.Spohr's opera *Jessonda*. When I have finished with that I will further write for you three duos for two flutes. I hope to send you both works at the end of April or May."<sup>6</sup> In May Kuhlau's Danish publisher, Carl Christian Lose, advertised that these two works would be issued at the same time in the publishing houses of Lose in Copenhagen and Farrenc in Paris<sup>7</sup>.

It is understandable that a Danish publisher was interested in an arrangement from *Jessonda* for Spohr was a popular composer in the Scandinavian countries. But he was not very popular in France<sup>8</sup>. So why did Aristide Farrenc bring out a work based on an opera by a composer nearly unknown to French concertgoers?

As early as 1825 the correspondent of a popular German journal reported that after performances of Weber's *Freischütz* and *Preciosa* in Paris, Spohr's *Jessonda* should be translated into French too.

But while *Freischütz* was a success *Preciosa* failed. Thus, the correspondent did not believe that *Jessonda* would be performed soon<sup>9</sup>. Four years later, in 1829, the Paris publisher Marescot issued a vocal score of Spohr's opera<sup>10</sup>. But *Jessonda* was not performed in Paris at this time.

Friedrich von Raumer complained in a letter of May 4, 1830: "I have not visited the German opera yet. The chorus, Haitzinger and Miss Fischer are lauded but anything else is said to be mediocre. Fallaciously, someone has chosen Spohr's *Faust* instead of his *Jessonda. Bibiana* by Pixis seems to have made no great impression."<sup>11</sup>

*Faust* failed, indeed: "The music of the opera *Faust* did not please the Parisians. The Paris newspapers admit that Spohr composes splendid quartets and quintets but they do not find much originality in his music for the stage. They just praise his artful instrumentation. One of the papers laments about the tremendous forest of notes which assails the listener's ears throughout the whole piece and do not let them take breath ... One aria, sung by Haitzinger, had to be repeated. However, this very aria was not composed by Spohr but by an Italian master and inserted in the opera by Haitzinger in the manner of other singers."<sup>12</sup>

In 1842 a German opera company settled in Paris for several weeks. The Paris correspondent of the *Wiener Allgemeine Musik-Zeitung*, Ferdinand Braun, believed that it was a convenient time because no German opera company had been there for ten years and because a prominent French musician fought for German music: "Didn't Berlioz start his crusade eight to ten years ago, didn't he argue with tireless enthusiasm and didn't he plant his banner laudably on the demolished ruins? On the banner were four names: Gluck, Beethoven, Weber, Mozart. Berlioz said and wrote all that is possible to say in the world; the names became finally known ... The audience was never better prepared for the reception of a German opera company."<sup>13</sup> He added: "Unfortunately, the opera company was mediocre. At first they staged *Der Freischütz* by Weber, which was played successfully at the *Grand Opéra* a few weeks ago. Contrary to the earlier production, this company lacked both a good conductor and good singers."<sup>14</sup>

This was the "preparation" of the Paris audience when this very company announced Spohr's *Jessonda*. Exactly when the French journals reviewed this *mise-en-scène* we do not know. Did the critics review the performance or just the opera's score? Braun cited the review by Henri Blanchard: "*Jessonda* takes a place in the repertoire but it is not adapted to excite the popular enthusiasm. It is a piece of art, curious to hear but — to be honest — which only gained a decent result."<sup>15</sup> Braun added a question mark to Blanchard's term "decent result"<sup>16</sup>. Indeed, *Jessonda* was not just a "decent result" but one of the most popular German operas of its time<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, Spohr declared that his music "is not adapted to please the multitude and excite the popular enthusiasm" like Weber's *Freischütz*<sup>18</sup>. In this case, Blanchard's estimation is quite right.

But not only the music itself hindered the popularity of *Jessonda* in France but also a dramaturgical element, very important for the French opera. B. Davons, a reviewer who declared that he disliked the music of Spohr, Berlioz and Halévy, hinted at this element: the choruses in *Jessonda* are hardly important<sup>19</sup>. From Lully's *tragédie lyrique* to Meyerbeer's *grand opéra* the Parisian audience was used to enjoying sweeping tableaux with choruses. Berlioz also stated that "the chorus had got hardly any occasion to scintillate in this sad opera."<sup>20</sup>

Another of Berlioz's points of criticism is remarkable: "It is surprising that Spohr, one of the most able German violinists, makes little use of the violins in this opera."<sup>21</sup> In many of Spohr's works, the parts for the first violins are very difficult. Often the consequence is that the chosen tempo of a Spohr performance is not the tempo intended (and prescribed) by Spohr but much slower so the first violins are able to play their parts without mistakes. This maybe leads to a sufficient performance but never to a great performance<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, Blanchard noted that the orchestra's performance was not great but sufficient<sup>23</sup>. And an orchestra which produces only a sufficient performance thereby produces music which sounds "cold, monotonous and also tedious" which is similar to Edmond Viel's description of the Parisian *Jessonda*<sup>24</sup>. For this reason another French reviewer assessed: "We confess that the mediocre and incoherent execution does

not allow us to make a definitive and well-rounded judgment about this estimable opera.”<sup>25</sup> Probably this ultimate problem caused also the rejection of Spohr’s music in nineteenth century France<sup>26</sup>. When Clive Brown states: “The carping reception which *Jessonda* met with in April 1842 contrasted sharply with the enthusiasm it had elicited in London two years earlier”<sup>27</sup>, this indicates that different standards of musical performances applied in London. A lot of British musicians visited Spohr in Kassel to become acquainted with his music, e.g. William Sterndale Bennett. Others went to Kassel to study the violin with him, e.g. Henry Blagrove and Thomas Mawkes. These musicians knew how to play Spohr. But British pupils of Spohr are a topic for another essay. It is likely that Farrenc’s edition of Kuhlau’s arrangement from 1830 did not turn out a commercial success in France because *Jessonda* was not performed there at this time. And, for sure, the mediocre production of 1842 was no argument to persuade anyone to buy Kuhlau’s arrangement.

### Notes

- 1 Philip L.Scowcroft, “A Spohr contemporary. Louise Farrenc (1804-75)”, *Spohr Journal* 39 (2012), p. 12-13.
- 2 Louis Spohr, *Louis Spohr’s Autobiography* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1865), v. 2, p. 257.
- 3 “Vormittags früh wieder allerlei Besuche, worunter H. Farrenc mit musikalischer Frau und Tochter, recht angenehm. Sie luden uns auf einen Abend ein zur Musikparthie.” (Marianne Spohr, *Tagebuch von der Pariser Reise 1844*, ms., Spohr Museum sign. Sp. Ms. ep. 2.2.02, f. 6r).
- 4 Spohr, *Autobiography*, v. 1. 1, p. 11.
- 5 Arndt Mehring, *Friedrich Kuhlau in the mirror of his flute works* (Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press 2000), p. 6.
- 6 “Nun habe ich für Sie angefangen Op.101 Variationen für Flöte und Pianoforte über ein sehr schönes Thema aus der Oper *Jessonda* von L. Spohr, wenn ich damit fertig bin, werde ich ferner für Sie schreiben: 3 Duos für 2 Flöten und hoffe, Ihnen beide Werke Ende Aprils oder Mays zu senden können.” (Friedrich Kuhlau, *Breve*, ed. Gorm Busk (København: Engstrøm & Sødring, 1990), p. 123). — Folker Göthel mentioned in his Spohr catalogue of works only arrangements of the whole opera but not arrangements of parts of *Jessonda* such as Kuhlau’s “Variations” (cf. *Thematisch-Bibliographisches Verzeichnis der Werke von Louis Spohr* (Tutzing, Schneider 1981), p. 356).
- 7 Carl Christian Lose, “Anzeige von getheiltem Verlags-Eigenthume”, *Intelligenzblatt zur allgemeinen musikalischen Zeitung* 32 (1830), p. 17.
- 8 About Spohr’s reception in France cf. Hélène Cao, *Louis Spohr ou Le don d’être heureux* (Paris: Editions Papillon 2006), pp. 64-67 and 114-115; Clive Brown, *Louis Spohr. A critical Biography* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1984), p. 260
- 9 “Paris, 28. Nov. 1825”, *Morgenblatt für gebildete Leser* 20 (1826), p. 24.
- 10 Cf. Göthel, *Verzeichnis*, p. 356.
- 11 “Die deutsche Oper besuchte ich noch nicht, die Chöre, Haitzinger und die Fischer werden gelobt, alles andere sey kaum mittelmäßig. Irrig hat man Spohr’s Faust statt der Jessonda gewählt, auch Bibiana von Pixis scheint keinen großen Eindruck gemacht zu haben.” (Friedrich von Raumer, *Briefe aus Paris und Frankreich im Jahre 1830* (Leipzig, Brockhaus, 1831), v. 1, p. 181).
- 12 “Die Musik der Oper Faust hat den Parisern auch wenig zugesagt. Die Pariser Tageblätter gestehen, daß Spohr vortreffliche Quartetten und Quintetten setzt, aber in seiner dramatischen Musik finden sie wenig Originelles, und rühmen nur die kunstvolle Instrumentation der Partitur. Eins dieser Blätter klagt über den ungeheuren Notenwald, der in diesem Stücke die Ohren der Zuhörer umrausche und sie nicht zu Athem kommen lasse ... Eine Arie, von Haitzinger gesungen, muß wiederholt werden; allein gerade diese Arie war nicht von Spohr, sondern von einem italienischen Meister und nach Art anderer Sänger von Haitzinger in diese Oper eingelegt worden.” (“Paris, April. Die deutsche Oper”, *Morgenblatt für gebildete Leser* 20 (1826), p. 456).

- 13 “Hat nicht seit acht bis zehn Jahren Berlioz seinen Kreuzzug begonnen, hat er nicht mit unermüdlichem Eifer gestritten, und seinen Banner nicht rühmlich aufgepflanzt auf den aungeschossenen Ruinen? Auf dem Banner standen vier Namen: Gluck, Beethoven, Weber, Mozart. Was auf der Welt Mögliches zu sagen, ist von Berlioz gesagt und gedruckt worden, die Namen wurden endlich bekannt ... Nie noch war das Publicum besser für den Empfang einer deutschen Operngesellschaft bestimmt.” (Ferdinand Braun, “Die deutsche Oper”, *Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung* 2 (1842), p. 283.
- 14 Ibid., p. 284.
- 15 “Jessonda prendra place au répertoire, mais n’attirera pas la foule. C’est un ouvrage d’artiste, curieux à entendre, qui n’a jamais obtenu, il faut le dire, qu’un succès d’estime un Allemagne.” (Henri Blanchard, “Jessonda”, *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* 9 (1842), p. 189).
- 16 Braun, “Deutsche Oper”, p. 284.
- 17 In his study about the German libretto in the early nineteenth century, Christoph Nieder chose 20 German operas which were performed the most in the theatres of 11 towns. This selection ranges from the *Freischütz* with 4.4 performances per town and year to Lortzing’s *Waffenschmied* with 0.2 performances. *Jessonda* belongs among those operas with 0.9 performances, together with Weber’s *Euryanthe* and Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*. However, *Jessonda* is maybe over represented in these statistics because Spohr’s place of employment, Kassel, is included in the survey (cf. Christoph Nieder, *Von der “Zauberflöte” zum “Lohengrin”. Das deutsche Opernlibretto in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Metzler 1989), p. 169).
- 18 Spohr, *Autobiography*, v. 2, p. 57.
- 19 B.Davons, “Opéra allemand. *Jessonda*, opéra en trois actes, de M. Spohr — *La Nuit de Grenade*, opéra en trois actes, de M. Conradin Kreutzer”, *L’Indépendant* 08.05.1842, p. 1.
- 20 “Le choristes n’avaient guère d’occasions de briller dans ce triste opéra” (Hector Berlioz, “Première représentation de *Jessonda*, opéra en trois actes de Spohr”, *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* 30.04.1842, p. 1).
- 21 “Il est singulier que Spohr, l’un des plus habiles violonistes de l’Allemagne, ait su tirer si peu de parti des violons dans cet opéra” (ibid).
- 22 The conductor Christian Fröhlich told me that he always took a lot of separate rehearsals with the first violins for his performances and recordings of Spohr’s violin concertos, overtures and the opera *Der Alchymist*.
- 23 “L’orchestre ... n’est pas merveilleux, mais il est suffisant” (Blanchard, “*Jessonda*”, ibid.)
- 24 “musique bien faite, mais froide, monotone et partant ennuyeuse” (Edmond Viel, “Ouverture du théâtre allemand. *Der Freyschütz — Jessonda*”, *Le Ménestrel* 01.05.1842, p. 2, English translation in: Brown, *Louis Spohr*, p. 260).
- 25 “Avouons encore que l’exécution médiocre et dépourvue d’ensemble ne peut permettre d’asseoir un jugement définitif et bien motivé sur cette estimable opéra” (“*Jessonda — Das Nachtlager von Granada*”, *L’Artiste* 3.1 (1842), p. 557).
- 26 I described similar problems with the reception of Spohr’s *Der Alchymist* in : Karl Traugott Goldbach, “In search of clues”, booklet with the CD Louis Spohr, *Der Alchymist*, Oehms Classics 2011, OC923-1, p. 8-11.
- 27 Brown, *Louis Spohr*, p. 260.