

SPOHR IN GROVE'S DICTIONARY OF MUSIC AND MUSICIANS, 1878-2001

by Mike Jarman

GEORGE GROVE brought out the first edition of his *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians* in four volumes between 1878 and 1889 with the entry on Spohr by Paul David appearing in the third volume which was published in 1883, the year that Grove received his knighthood. At this time Spohr was still conventionally counted among the great composers though performances of his music were gradually declining.

This ambiguous position is reflected in David's article which is on pages 657-664 and extends across 13 columns of the double-column layout. On the one hand, David expresses many of the reservations about Spohr which had developed even before his death in 1859 but on the other, he still praises many of the composer's achievements.

The article begins by taking the reader through Spohr's life and this section is not just a rewrite of the composer's *Autobiography*. For instance, David writes: 'In the winter of 1824 he passed some time in Berlin, and renewed and cemented the friendship with Felix Mendelssohn and the members of his family, which had been begun when they visited him at Cassel in 1822 [this date is misprinted 1882 but 1822 is clearly meant].' Spohr himself never mentions this in his memoirs and very little has been written about this friendship with the Mendelssohn family.

In assessing Spohr's music, David says: 'The technical workmanship in his compositions is admirable, the thematic treatment his strong point; but it would appear that this was the result rather of a happy musical organisation than of deep study.' Later he adds: 'To his violin-concertos — and among them especially to the 7th, 8th, and 9th — must be assigned the first place among his works. They are only surpassed by those of Beethoven and Mendelssohn, and are probably destined to live longer than any other of his works. They are distinguished as much by noble and elevated ideas as by masterly thematic treatment; while the supreme fitness of every note in the solo-part to the nature of the violin, need hardly be mentioned. They are not likely to disappear soon from the repertory of the best violinists. His duets and concertantes for two violins, and for violin and viola, are of their kind unsurpassed. By the frequent employment of double stops great sonority is produced, and, if well played, the effect is charming.' Of course, at the time David was writing, the violin concertos of both Brahms and Tchaikovsky had just appeared so had still to establish themselves fully.

After discussing the prominence of the first violin part in Spohr's string quartets, David adds: 'Allowing all this, it must be maintained that many of the slow movements are of great beauty; and altogether, in spite of undeniable drawbacks, his quartets contain so much fine and noble music as certainly not to deserve the utter neglect they have fallen into.'

On *Jessonda*, David states that it 'soon made the rounds of all the opera-houses in Germany, with great and well-deserved success' and he goes on to consider the opera 'as the culminating point of Spohr's activity as a composer. At Leipzig and Berlin, where he himself conducted the first performances, it was received with an enthusiasm little inferior to that roused a few years before by the 'Freischütz''

Turning to the critical side, David says: 'Spohr certainly was a born musician, second only to the very greatest masters in true musical instinct; in power of concentration and of work hardly inferior to any. But the range of his talent was not wide; he never seems to have been able to step

out of a given circle of ideas and sentiments. He never left the circle of his own individuality, but drew everything within it.' On this point of individuality, he adds: 'He certainly was not devoid of originality — in fact his style and manner are so entirely his own that no composer is perhaps so absolutely unmistakable as he is.'

The second edition of Grove's dictionary, edited by J. A. Fuller-Maitland, was published in five volumes 1904-10 but David's article was printed in its entirety on pages 638-645 with a new footnote referring to the 1892 volume of Moritz Hauptmann's letters to Spohr and others in translation.

H. C. Colles edited the third edition of Grove which appeared in 1927, also in five volumes with David's essay again included, though with a few adjustments, reducing the columns from 13 to 12 (pp.96-103). Side headings have now been inserted, as follows: Education and travel; Vienna; London and Paris; Appointment at Cassel; Oratorios for England; Last years; Qualities of the musician; Spohr as violinist. One or two items have been trimmed, for instance his criticisms of Beethoven, quoted at some length in 1883, are now reduced to 'His criticism of the C minor and Choral Symphonies has gained for Spohr, as a critic, an unenviable reputation.'

The most important amendment comes at the very start. First edition: 'SPOHR, LOUIS, great violinist and famous composer' turns into 'SPOHR, LOUIS, (*b.* Brunswick, Apr. 5, 1784; *d.* Cassel, Oct. 22, 1859), great violinist and composer' so that the word 'famous' has disappeared, no doubt reflecting Spohr's declining status between 1883 and 1910. However, one positive addition is the inclusion of a portrait of Spohr, the well-known photograph from 1857.

Colles also edited the fourth edition, again in five volumes, and issued in 1940 with the David contribution unchanged from the previous edition and still on pages 96-103, but there was a drastic overhaul of David's article in the fifth edition, edited by Eric Blom in nine volumes and published in 1954. Though Blom instituted the most thoroughgoing revision of the work since Grove's original with many new articles, by staying with David, he must have felt that Spohr was no longer important enough for such treatment, not even having 'Cassel' changed to its modern style of 'Kassel'.

'Great violinist and composer' is now reduced to 'German violinist and composer' while nearly all of David's positive statements on Spohr have been jettisoned, leaving just the negative ones such as the comment on the 'sameness — nay, monotony — in his works'. All reference to the outstanding qualities of his violin concertos have gone as has the praise for *Jessonda* which is now only mentioned as having 'made the round of all the opera-houses in Germany'. Spohr's space is now reduced to a meagre four columns on pages 13-19. This coverage in Grove Five reflects the nadir to which Spohr's fortunes had slumped by 1954 but, ironically, that was the very year in which the Louis Spohr Gesellschaft was formed in Kassél, the first step on the long, slow and hard road to his rehabilitation.

For the next edition in 1980, the publishers decided on a thorough revamp with a completely new look and layout so instead of Grove Six they issued *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* first edition in 20 volumes, edited by Stanley Sadie. Paul David was at last retired and Martin Weyer was selected to take a fresh look at Spohr. His article covered eight columns in Volume 18 on pages 9-16 — twice as many columns as the 1954 edition.

Now Spohr is categorised as 'German composer, violinist and conductor' but Martin Weyer immediately adds: 'He was one of the leading composers of instrumental music of the early Romantic period, and in his operas he made stylistic developments that anticipated Wagner's music dramas in two important respects, *Durchkomponierung* and the use of leitmotifs.'

The side headings have been reduced simply to 'life' and 'works' and there are now two portraits — the 1857 photograph used previously plus Spohr's own self-portrait of 1807. The

survey of Spohr's life takes account of more modern research to give a well-balanced coverage to this part of the article. Turning to the works, there are many positive comments such as the fact that, next to Mozart's and Weber's, Spohr's clarinet concertos 'may be considered the most important in the genre. Like the violin concertos they display a happy balance of substance and virtuosity.' However, Martin Weyer surely goes astray when he claims that Spohr's oratorios 'quickly fell into oblivion' when Mendelssohn's *St Paul* and *Elijah* 'came to the public's attention'. On the contrary, *Die letzten Dinge* as *The Last Judgment* remained a favourite in England into the 1920s, long outlasting Spohr's other compositions though it is true that this was not the case in continental Europe.

He is more accurate when discussing the operas: 'Three of Spohr's operas, *Faust*, *Zemire und Azor* and *Jessonda*, are important not only in Spohr's development as a composer but in the history of the genre itself, where Spohr's influences are traceable as late as in Wagner's music dramas.' Of *Faust*, he refers to its 'associative system of leitmotifs, which function here as symbols of psychic content' and says that this 'anticipatory, almost prophetic function of the leitmotif had a strong influence on Wagner.' Turning to *Zemire und Azor*, he writes that this fairy-tale opera's 'Romantic concept of redemption achieved central importance. Harmony and orchestration were used to create the atmosphere, as, for example, the oscillations of *Rheingold*-like natural triads in the Prelude to Act 1.'

With *Jessonda*, Spohr 'found ample opportunity to show off his gifts in the lyrical idiom in their best light, the introduction to Act 1 and the scenes with Jessonda, Amazili and Nadori making up the high points of the opera. Spohr's chromaticism, elsewhere used in only a haphazard fashion, is transformed poetically into a symbolical language of the soul, with almost Wagnerian sensitivity.'

Finally, Martin Weyer attempts to account for Spohr's fall from the high status accorded to him in his own lifetime and writes: 'The reasons for this are not due simply to the works themselves but also to the changing attitudes towards life and art in the first half of the 19th century. Spohr's artistic rise coincided with the bourgeoisie winning social independence from the nobility, to whom the privilege of music-making had primarily belonged. As a travelling composer and virtuoso, as well as a conductor at music festivals throughout Germany, Spohr won and maintained the reputation of artistic idol of the middle-class musical public; by 1820 his fame had spread throughout Europe and in 1823, with the successful production of *Jessonda*, it reached its highest point.'

He goes on to suggest that Spohr's appointment in Kassel eventually consigned him away from this mainstream into a byway of Romanticism to become a representative of the Biedermeier and so 'it is therefore not surprising that the following generation did not reckon him as a companion in their struggle.' However, his final sentence notes a significant development: 'There is a contemporary trend towards the selective revival of his instrumental works and songs; the Louis Spohr Gesellschaft in Kassel, with its new editions, has been particularly active in initiating this revival.'

By the time of the second edition of the New Grove in 2001 it had expanded to 29 volumes, still edited by Stanley Sadie though now with John Tyrrell as executive editor. Martin Weyer's reign as Grove's Spohr expert was a short one. For 2001, Clive Brown, author of the 1984 definitive critical biography of the composer, took up the cause. He was allowed as many as 16 columns in Volume 23 (pages 198-211) and in addition to the two portraits from 1980 also included an illustration of the title page of the 1852 vocal score of the revised version of *Faust*, as well as two lengthy musical examples ('Behold the Lamb that was slain' from *The Last Judgment*; and the slow movement of the Piano Trio No.2 in F major, Op.123).

Again, Spohr is shown as 'German composer, violinist and conductor' but Clive Brown adds: 'Regarded by many contemporaries as worthy of a place beside Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven in the pantheon of the greatest composers, he has, together with Gluck and Cherubini, been allotted a considerably lower status by posterity. Mozart's *Figaro* and Wagner's *Tristan* were both composed during Spohr's lifetime; his own work looks, Janus-like, towards both the formalism and clarity of the Classical tradition, and the structural and harmonic experimentation associated with 19th-century Romanticism.'

The author's detailed research into Spohr's visits to England enhances his biographical text with many relevant quotations from British newspapers and magazines and he in effect corrects Martin Weyer's views on the oratorios of Spohr and Mendelssohn by stating: 'For much of the 19th century, especially in England, Spohr's oratorios were considered, alongside Mendelssohn's (which may have overshadowed but did not supplant them), as the legitimate and, with the possible exception of Haydn's *The Creation*, the only worthy successors to Handel's.'

Like his predecessors, Paul David and Martin Weyer, Clive Brown has high praise for *Jessonda*, writing: '*Jessonda* has the most satisfactory libretto of all Spohr's operas, achieves an effective balance between musical and dramatic exigencies, and displays his melodic and harmonic gift at its most finely honed. On its introduction to England in 1840, *The Britannia* described it as "a tissue of the most lovely melodies and delicious combinations of harmony we ever heard", while *The Morning Chronicle* averred that "*Jessonda* is not surpassed by any opera that we know, and is equalled by very few." It was by far Spohr's most successful stage work and retained a firm place in the German repertory until proscribed by the Nazis as racially unsound.'

In discussing the symphonies, Clive Brown has special praise for the Fifth: 'It is one of his most successful symphonies; thematic connection between the first movement and Finale gives it an impression of unity, while the slow movement, enriched by trombones, is among his most beautiful.' In concluding this symphonic survey, he suggests: 'The most enduring was the Fourth, though the Second, Fifth and Seventh are, arguably, finer music.'

Summing up, Clive Brown ends on a highly positive note: 'The charges of mannerism and self-repetition that were levelled at Spohr even during his lifetime led, within a short time of his death, to a rapid decline in his reputation. Although he was conventionally numbered among major composers until the end of the century, his music was performed with ever-decreasing frequency. The Wagner cult, the rise of musical nationalism, and other developments at the beginning of the 20th century caused Spohr eventually to be relegated to the status of such composers as Hummel, with whom it would formerly have been unthinkable to compare him, and, despite some scholarly interest, he has scarcely featured in most 20th-century histories of music.'

However over recent years things began to change: 'At the time of the bicentenary of Spohr's birth [in 1984] only a tiny proportion of his output had been recorded, but in the dozen or so years that followed, commercial recordings of numerous major works, including the complete symphonies, violin concertos, overtures and virtually all his chamber works, as well as the operas and sacred music, became available, many in several interpretations; there were also stagings of his operas *Faust*, *Zemire und Azor* and *Jessonda*. These recordings and performances have allowed a more judicious assessment of Spohr's artistic worth, and have facilitated appreciation of the qualities that made such a powerful impact on his younger contemporaries as well as those that carried the seeds of later neglect and denigration; they have also revealed that, at his best, Spohr deserves to stand alongside all but the greatest composers of his epoch.'