

# SPOHR AND BACH

by Keith Warsop

*This article incorporates material from a short piece on Spohr and Bach included in 'More Spohr Mysteries' by the present author which appeared in Spohr Journal 28 (2001) and dealt with Hartmut Becker's explanation for the St Matthew Passion quotations in Spohr's Violin Concerto No.2.*

**A**LTHOUGH Mendelssohn's 1829 Berlin performance of the *St Matthew Passion* is popularly thought to have sparked the 19th century Bach revival, in fact modern scholars have shown that it was the culminating point in the rediscovery of his music in which Spohr, too, played a significant role. Nicholas Temperley, in a survey of the 'Bach Revival', states that the 1829 performance 'transferred the revival from a cult of intellectuals into a popular movement.'

He suggests that the beginnings of the revival 'began at about the same time in Germany, where most of Bach's descendants and pupils, and most of his surviving music, were to be found; and in England, where musical historicism was already well advanced by the end of the 18th century.' Temperley points out, for instance, that already in the 1770s the pianist Muzio Clementi was said to have practised Bach for hours on end during the early days of his time in England.

If Temperley is correct, then Spohr must be seen as one of those 'intellectuals' who were involved with Bach before that 1829 revival of the *St Matthew Passion*. There is even a biographical link between Spohr and Bach, as explained by Hartmut Becker in his examination of the composer's youthful development.

He says: 'The musical mentor of Spohr's youth, the Brunswick Court Music Director Johann Gottfried Schwanberger, died on 5 April 1804, Spohr's 20th birthday. Schwanberger had received his training as an opera composer in Italy and with Hasse in Dresden. Since Schwanberger's father had studied with Johann Sebastian Bach and he himself was a personal friend of Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel, he was thoroughly acquainted with the polyphonic traditions of the Baroque and was in the position to impart to the young Spohr the knowledge of a then by and large forgotten music culture, a knowledge which formed the foundation of Spohr's later involvement in the revival of early music, above all that of Johann Sebastian Bach, in the 1820s and 1830s.'

Becker refers to Spohr's Violin Concerto No.2 in D minor, Op.2, composed in the summer of 1804, and the fact that 'in 1926 the music scholar Hans Joachim Moser noticed two citations from Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in the *Adagio* and termed them "peculiar" because he was not aware of the background behind them.' He goes on to suggest that these quotations (aria No.35 'Geduld, Geduld wenn mich falsche Zungen' and No.57 'Komm, süßes Kreuz') were the composer's cryptographic tribute to Schwanberger, whose death occurred just a few weeks before Spohr wrote his concerto. Becker also notes that Spohr later quotes the concluding choral number from the *St Matthew Passion*, 'Ruhe sanfte, sanfte ruh'.

Elsewhere, Becker has referred to two important musical strands in the experiences of the young Spohr. He 'had been acquainted as a violinist both with the quite conservative repertoire of his instructors and mentors, who taught the works of Handel, Telemann, the Graun brothers and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, while also coming into contact with the very latest music: his violin teachers, chamber musician Gottfried Kunisch and concertmaster Charles Louis Maucourt,

were very happy to let him gain experience by standing in for absent musicians in the Hoftheater. There he played for French operas by Nicolas Dalayrac, Henri Berton, Luigi Cherubini and Etienne Méhul and also for Mozart's great Viennese operas.'

However, Becker does not explain how Spohr could have known the *St Matthew Passion* in 1804 so as to be able to insert quotations from it into his concerto. The fact remains that he did so and there are two possible answers to this question. One is that Schwanberger's father, Georg Heinrich Ludwig, during his studies with Johann Sebastian Bach, copied out extracts as an exercise and that these copies were passed on to the son who let Spohr see them during his own youthful compositional studies. The other and, in our view, more likely scenario, is that Schwanberger acquired them from Emanuel Bach who inherited the *St Matthew Passion* material. Furthermore, during his years in Hamburg from 1768 to his death in 1788, it was part of Bach's duties to compose and mount an annual Passion performance; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, in turn each year.

For these performances Bach did not compose completely new works. Usually he provided fresh arias but otherwise compiled the remainder by putting together choruses, chorales and recitatives from his own earlier works, those of his father and also other composers such as his predecessor Telemann or Homilius.

Thus, the music for Johann Sebastian Bach's *St Matthew Passion* was not mouldering away, covered in dust in an attic or a trunk but was being referred to and, in part, utilised so that Schwanberger would have had ample opportunity to examine the music.

Quite why a teenage musician was able to study valuable material owned by a senior composer of high court status can only be explained through looking at Spohr's self-confident bearing and the family links with Schwanberger who had given singing and piano lessons to Spohr's mother.

In the years immediately after 1804 Spohr got to know more Bach enthusiasts including Johann Nicolaus Forkel (1749-1818), whose pioneering Bach biography was published in 1802, Johann Friedrich Rochlitz (1769-1842), editor of the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, and Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832), director of the Berlin Sing-Akademie which acquired much Bach material from the estate of Emanuel Bach.

On a visit to Hamburg in 1810 he met Christian Friedrich Gottlieb Schwenke (1767-1822) and this developed into a lasting friendship. Schwenke was Emanuel Bach's successor in Hamburg and it was from him that Spohr later acquired Johann Sebastian Bach's autograph of the Inventions and Sinfonias, BWV772-801, part of the *Clavier-Büchlein* for Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, one of his most treasured possessions. In the same year he met Friedrich Christian Lueder (1781-1861) at the Music Festival in Frankenhausen where Spohr was conductor and another lifelong friendship ensued. Lueder was a pupil of Forkel and inherited his teacher's reverence for Bach.

A further stimulus came during Spohr's stay in Vienna (1812-15) when he discovered that Mozart had been intensely interested in Bach through Baron Gottfried van Swieten's passion for old music, including concerts at his Vienna house which included works by Bach.

However, it was only after Spohr's permanent move to Kassel in 1822 that he was able to increase his involvement with Bach, though shortly before this, in 1820, on his way to Paris he had stopped in Heidelberg where he met Anton Friedrich Justus Thibaut (1774-1840) who ran a choral society which sang nothing but ancient Italian music such as the works of Palestrina.

Spohr tells us that apart from the works he had heard in the Sistine Chapel while in Rome he knew nothing of this music. After attending Thibaut's rehearsals Spohr begged to be allowed to study the scores and so he was able to go through them at the piano in Thibaut's music room. Spohr adds: 'I took daily advantage of this favour and by that means made myself intimately

acquainted with the vocal method and harmonic sequence of the old masters.’ It was this study which inspired Spohr to write his own C minor Mass, Op.54, and though not directly linked to Bach, this episode undoubtedly gave him a stronger taste for reviving the music of the past.

As soon as he was established in Kassel, Spohr formed a choral group, the St Cecilia Society, in order to do just this. From as early as 1824 Bach’s motets and then the *Magnificat* along with Handel, J. G. Graun, Leo and pieces by other early musicians like Palestrina and Carissimi were performed though the programmes also included more modern works by composers such as Haydn, Mozart, Fesca, Moritz Hauptmann and Spohr himself.

By the mid-1820s it appears that manuscript copies of the *St Matthew Passion* were in circulation and the growing appreciation of Bach is demonstrated by Spohr’s colleague and assistant in Kassel, Moritz Hauptmann, who wrote to his friend, Franz Hauser in Munich in November 1825 about Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier*:

‘No one has ever rivalled that extraordinary wealth of combination; no one has ever sounded those depths of expression. These glorious compositions are quite unique; they possess in themselves all the conditions of their existence and their development. They are so perfect, so full of intrinsic vitality, that one is tempted to deny that Art and the artist had anything to do with them, just as one is tempted to deny the Creator, who has made Nature so divine, that she continues to exist of herself, by virtue of some inner necessity.’

Hauptmann was also keen to get his hands on a copy of the *St Matthew Passion*. Learning in February 1827 that Hauser was arranging to send a copy to someone in Frankfurt, he asked: ‘Please tell me whether Bach’s *Passion* is to be sent by Cassel or direct to Frankfurt? If by Cassel, it might stay with me for a few days to rest itself.’

A year later a copy of the work had definitely reached Kassel. Hauptmann told Hauser in February 1828: ‘I can’t tell you how I am enjoying the *Passion* music. Only I should like to know, whether those grand things of Bach were ever performed or not, or whether they were so wretchedly given as to produce no effect. I can imagine either alternative, as Bach himself was conductor, and yet there is no mention of any performance — at least, I have never come across any allusion to it in books which speak of the affairs of the day. His music has always been too grand for the general public, and I expect that we are not up to it, even now. Why, don’t you see, the *Passion Music* is not passionate enough for the likes of us; it is too antiquated in form, it is insipid, it is unenjoyable on account of the passing notes!’ In this last sentence we surely detect Hauptmann taking a sarcastic swipe at contemporary taste.

By now Spohr himself had acquired the *Passion* material. Herfried Homburg quotes from an undated letter by Spohr which he suggests was written in autumn 1827 to Lueder. In it the composer said he was considering how he could possibly perform it. Homburg also quotes a letter from Spohr to the publisher Schlesinger in September 1829: ‘Honoured Sir; Herewith I send you a list of the local subscribers for the Bach *Passion Music*. I possess a manuscript copy of the score which cost me more than 12 Reichsthalers.’

In 1830 the Kassel choral societies began work on it but it was not until November 1832 that Spohr wrote to his Frankfurt friend Wilhelm Speyer about a planned performance. However, it seems that he had already ‘smuggled’ part of it into a concert for Hauptmann wrote to Hauser about it in late August 1832: ‘At the end of September, we are to have a grand Concert in the church. Part I: two Psalms by Spohr [presumably from the recently composed Op.85], and a Symphony (the new one, I suppose [No.4 *Die Weihe der Töne*]); Part II: the First Part of *The Passion Music*, for which we have already had one rehearsal with chorus, enough to show that we want many more.’

Spohr’s November letter to Speyer refers to ‘the Prince’s permission’ Not only had all works

to be performed to be submitted for his approval and permission, but he could also forbid the use of Kassel's two main churches, the Court and Garrison churches. Spohr wrote: 'Today I shall conduct the first orchestral rehearsal of the Bach *St Matthew Passion* which should be given in a week's time in the Grosse Kirche. For four weeks we have been imploring the Prince's permission and still have not got it, indeed I am not sure that it will not be refused at the last moment. God help us.' Homburg notes that it was refused but that Spohr went ahead and performed the work in the Bruder Kirche, though without an orchestra; presumably piano and/or organ were used instead.

Hauptmann wrote to Hauser about this: 'Perhaps you read in the newspapers that we failed to get the Grand Duke's consent to a performance of Bach's *Passion Music*. We had three big rehearsals, however. Our chorus was nothing like so good as the Frankfurt one, and the performance was generally inferior; but we were highly delighted, and I know now the music for the first time.'

However, in April 1833 Spohr was able to report more happily to another friend: 'Next Friday at last a complete performance of the *Matthew Passion* will take place, exactly as written, with double orchestra and full woodwind. The well rehearsed chorus will consist of 70 voices, and I hope for an impressive result.' Note that Spohr states that the work would be performed 'exactly as written', whereas in 1829 Mendelssohn introduced cuts and other alterations which perhaps reflects some doubts over the contemporary reaction to the *Passion*.

This time Hauptmann was more enthusiastic about the outcome, telling Hauser: 'Our performance of the *Passion Music* was, everything considered, not so bad after all; could we repeat it soon, it would go very well. The choruses went best; the solo parts are too difficult for our singers, let alone amateurs.' He seems here to have been accurate in his assessment of the performance which was considered so satisfactory that the work was repeated in 1834

It was about now that Lutheran chorales turned up in Romantic symphonies — Mendelssohn included 'Ein Feste Burg' in his *Reformation* Symphony (No.5 in D major, Op.107) of 1830 and Spohr 'Begrabt den Leib' in the funeral music of *Die Weihe der Töne* (No.4 in F major, Op.86) of 1832. It is perhaps significant that the two German composers who had been so closely bound up with performances of the *St Matthew Passion* at this time should import such a Bachian element as a chorale into their symphonies.

After the 1834 performance Spohr began work on his own Passion oratorio, *Des Heilands letzte Stunden* ('The Last Hours of the Saviour', known at first in England as *The Crucifixion* and then more permanently as *Calvary*), which was completed early in 1835. However, while the influence of Bach's work can be detected in a few places, almost inevitable bearing in mind the subject matter, it is not really very strong and Spohr goes his own way in many areas, probably partly because, unlike Bach, he was not writing for an Easter church service.

So he has an overture whose slow, contrapuntal character is unlike our standard idea of an overture but whose solemn mood sets the scene for the tragic events to follow. Spohr also avoids the use of Lutheran chorales and in this respect Mendelssohn's 1835 oratorio *St Paul* is much more closely modelled on Bach.

The most modern number in Spohr's oratorio is the earthquake chorus 'Welch drohend Ungewitter' ('What threat'ning tempest') which follows immediately after the crucifixion and is scored for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons and trumpets with four horns, three trombones, one set of timpani tuned in A b, A and D, another set tuned to G, B# and C, the usual strings, an organ (marked *ad lib* but very effective when used), solo vocal quartet, one chorus of the disciples and friends of Jesus and another of the priests and Israelites. In contrast, the gentle closing number 'Wir drücken dir die Augen zu' ('Beloved Lord, Thine eyes we close') has a

distinctly Bachian feel to it without in any way jettisoning Spohr's typical harmonic idiom.

With public performances of the *St Matthew Passion*, the *St John Passion*, the B minor Mass and the *Magnificat* spreading, by now Bach had come to be revered as one of the great German masters and his name mentioned in the same breath as Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven even though many of his other works remained in manuscript before being gradually published by the Bach-Gesellschaft which was formed in 1850 and issued the complete edition over the next half century.

So Bach was now automatically included in the historical concerts which began to be staged in Germany in the 1830s, especially by Mendelssohn in Leipzig, so that when Spohr conceived his Sixth Symphony (*Historical Symphony in the Style and Taste of Four Different Periods*) in 1839, it was not surprising that he called the first movement 'Bach and Handel Period 1720'.

Joshua Berrett notes that the first subject of this movement, *Allegro moderato*, is anticipated at a slower tempo in the seven-bar *Largo grave* introduction, and 'is akin to the one used by Bach in the C major fugue from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 1. Both are constructed from the lower tetrachord of the tonic major scale and start on the second half of the first beat, moving in an ascending stepwise pattern of even eighth notes; both are used in four-part fugues involving real rather than tonal imitation. In the opening section of this movement as a whole, purists could take exception to the direct octaves (m.36), resolution of the tritone by a parallel motion (m.37-38), and a ritard anticipating the *Pastorale*.'

After comments on the 'Handel' section (the *Pastorale*), he concludes: 'The varied reprise of the fugal section is interesting primarily for the introduction of freely interspersed accompanying lines, a touch of stretto in the course of the closing nine measures of tonic pedal, and an unidiomatic ritard coupled with augmentation in the final four measures.'

Soon after this 'Spohrification' of Bach, the composer returned to the real thing, directing further Kassel performances of the *St Matthew Passion* in 1845 and 1851 and this final one was said to be the finest of all.

Spohr's love of Bach's music continued right up to his deathbed, even replacing that of his lifelong idol Mozart. According to the final pages of his *Autobiography* added by his family, in his final weeks he frequently requested his wife to play something to him and showed a preference for the piano music of Bach and Mendelssohn.

## Bibliography

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