

# SPOHR'S LONDON CONCERTS OF 1853

by Tony Brown

THE New Philharmonic Society of London was established in 1852 as a rival to the 40-year-old Philharmonic Society (not yet 'Royal') which was felt to be getting into something of a rut and the new arrivals certainly made an instant impact as they engaged Hector Berlioz as conductor for their opening season whose highlight was a stunning performance of Beethoven's Choral Symphony.

In January 1853 Spohr received an invitation from Dr Henry Wylde, director of the Society, to conduct the final two concerts of that summer's programme. As the chapters added to Spohr's memoirs by his wife and family explain: 'It was of the greatest interest to him to procure a hearing for his grander orchestral compositions which would there be performed with all that power which was already known to him, before a public who, like all the performers, understood so thoroughly the spirit of his music.' Spohr therefore made his sixth and final visit to England.

The memoirs quote from a letter home to Kassel: 'Last evening Spohr consummated the first of his great achievements; the direction of the fine New Philharmonic concerts in Exeter Hall, where he was again received with the same enthusiasm as formerly, and which was manifested throughout the whole performance. We found our exalted expectations of this gigantic orchestra, wholly composed of musicians of high standing, fully realised, and the impression made by the immense mass in the spacious and densely crowded hall was truly grand and imposing.

'Even the ninth symphony of Beethoven, abnormal as are many things therein, and especially the last subject, with the "ode to joy", executed in the finished manner it was, afforded a real enjoyment. Spohr's *Overture in the Serious Style* opened the concert and had a grand effect; also that of *Jessonda* which was even encored. This was followed by the tenor aria in *Jessonda*, splendidly sung by Theodore Formes and received with tumultuous applause.'

A further letter dealt with the second concert which included Spohr's Symphony No.7 *Irdisches und Göttliches im Menschenleben* and remarks: 'The double symphony seemed as though it had been written expressly for such orchestral powers and for this place. The smaller orchestra was, in accordance with several trials made at the rehearsal, placed high up above and apart; and sometimes between the powerful and imposing masses of tone of the larger orchestra it sounded really like music from another sphere.'

Fellow German composer Peter von Lindpaintner had conducted the earlier New Philharmonic Society programmes and it was in the fifth concert of the series that Spohr made his debut, on Wednesday June 29. The bill of fare was:

## PART I

Overture in Serious Style, Op.126 ..... Spohr  
'Ave verum' for tenor, 'Kyrie Eleison' for chorus ..... Edouard Silas  
Symphony No.9 in D minor, Op.125 ..... Beethoven

## PART II

Piano Concerto No.2 in D minor, Op.40 ..... Mendelssohn  
Aria from *The Magic Flute*: 'O zittre nicht' ..... Mozart  
Overture *Jessonda*, Op.63 ..... Spohr  
Recit. & Aria from *Jessonda*: 'Still lag auf meiner Seele' ..... Spohr  
Flute solo on 'Carnival of Venice' ..... Reichert  
Overture *Prometheus*, Op.43 ..... Beethoven

There are lengthy reports of the concert in many London newspapers. *The Morning Star* of July 4 said: 'Dr Spohr, the greatest living musician, conducted; and, amongst other things of first-rate excellence, Beethoven's choral symphony was performed.

'When this colossal work was produced by the New Philharmonic Society last season, under the direction of M. Berlioz, we stated that it had never before been so well played in this country; and still higher praise must be awarded to its execution on Wednesday evening, when the band and chorus, being more familiar with its profound beauties, and having a man like Spohr (the most experienced conductor in the world) to guide them, acquitted themselves of their arduous duties with more confidence and precision than ever.

'The venerable musician, who made his first public appearance in London this year on the present occasion, was enthusiastically cheered by both the band and audience on taking his seat in the orchestra, and it was truly astonishing to see how lightly he bore the weight of his 73 years [*sic.*, Spohr was actually 69], how keenly he watched the movements of the executants, and energetically enforced a due expression of Beethoven's mighty conception.

'Having conducted most admirably this surprising symphony [...] Spohr could scarcely fail to do justice to the rest of the programme, especially as it included many of his own works, amongst which were a concert overture of great merit, the beautiful overture to "Jessonda" (rapturously re-demanded), and an air "Still lag auf meiner Seele" from the same opera, excellently sung by Herr Theodore Formes, a young German tenor, possessing a good chest voice, and remarkable talents. This gentleman is a brother of the popular bass singer.' The report then goes on to consider briefly the other items in the programme.

*The Standard* of June 30 also referred to the Berlioz concert: 'The performance of Beethoven's Choral Symphony was one of the great events of the first season of the New Philharmonic Society. Under the direction of M. Hector Berlioz it will never be forgotten that it was given with extraordinary power and effect, resulting, not merely from the energy and decision of the conductor, but from the circumstance of an unusual number of rehearsals having been conceded.'

After more comment on the problems for the performers, the review continues: 'Although the preparation of the symphony under Dr Spohr has not been so frequent, the performance of last night was highly meritorious, and fully maintained the credit of the society as regards the elucidation of this particular work.

'The allegro in D minor, which musical poets are disposed to read as a representation of the vague dreaminess of joy, and the scherzo which deals with the same sentiment in its more fantastic and exultant moods, were both given with adequate picturesqueness, and all the numerous obligato [*sic.*] points and climaxes observed with a point and dexterity which alike betrayed the skill of the players and their obedience to the baton of the illustrious composer who presided over them.

'The calm resignation, so pure and tranquil, which pervades the lovely adagio in B flat, was also beautifully expressed, and the general serenity of the tone was not even impaired, for a wonder, by the unsteadiness of the horns.

'The gigantic bass recitatives of the last movement came out with striking force — leading nobly to the choral setting of Schiller's famous ode. In this the large body of singers exerted themselves most commendably, and the performance of this trying chain of choruses was broad, majestic and exciting.

'The vocal solos were infinitely better sung than they were last year; and Mr Weiss and Herr Theodore Formes, in particular, deserve praise for the clearness with which they rendered music anything but regular or conventional in its phraseology. Mlle Bury and Miss Bassano were the

other principals. The loud and prolonged applause which was bestowed by the audience at the close of the symphony betokened the interest which the performance awakened.

‘The Concert Overture which headed the programme is a good specimen of Spohr’s orchestral style, both form and colouring plainly evidencing the pen from which it proceeded. This, and the overture to *Jessonda*, were selected by the directors in honour, doubtless, of the composer — connected so intimately as he was with the night’s proceedings. Both were played with care and brilliancy, and the *Jessonda* was encored.’ Comments then followed on the other works in the concert.

The sixth and final Society concert was at Exeter Hall on Friday July 8 and it was here that Spohr’s ‘grander orchestral compositions’ were heard. The programme was:

#### PART I

Overture <i>Geneveva</i> .....	Charles Horsley
Quartet-Concerto in A minor, Op.131 .....	Spohr
Romanza from <i>Attila</i> : ‘Star of the Morning’ .....	Howard Glover
Aria: ‘Unglückesel’ge’ .....	Mendelssohn
Symphony No.7 in C major, Op.121 .....	Spohr
Duo for two pianos on a march from Weber’s <i>Preciosa</i> .....	Mendelssohn/Moscheles

#### PART II

Symphony No.2 in D major, Op.36. ....	Beethoven
Air: ‘When the Evening Bells’ .....	Mendelssohn
Overture <i>Fidelio</i> .....	Beethoven
Two Lieder: ‘Frühlingslied’ .....	Mendelssohn
‘Schifflein’ .....	Grell
Oboe Fantasia .....	Antoine J. Lavigne
Overture <i>Der Berggeist</i> , Op.73 .....	Spohr

*The Morning Post* preceded a report of the concert with an assessment of Spohr which was wholly favourable: ‘The engagement of Dr Spohr has been the great feature of the season, which closed last night. Of the well-earned fame, long, and in every respect most honourable, career of the great composer, who is regarded by all true musicians of the present day with almost filial reverence, very much might be said; and, were sufficient time and space allowed us, we know of no more profitable use to which it might be dedicated than that of duly celebrating the vast merits of one of the greatest of that noble line of classic composers which commenced with Haydn.

‘Louis Spohr, like his renowned predecessors, has excelled in every branch of musical art. His oratorios of “Calvary”, “The Fall of Babylon”, “The Last Judgment”, the symphonies entitled “Weihe der Töne”, “The Seasons”, &c.; the operas of “Zemire und Azor”, “Jesonda”, “Faust”, “Der Alchymist”, “Pietro von Abano”, “Der Berg-geist” and “Die Kreuzfahrer”, numerous sacred pieces, so-called chamber music, of every description, besides several violin concertos of unsurpassable, and in some respects, unrivalled excellence, though, generally speaking, unequal in merit, having been composed at various periods of his long career, may all be quoted as possessing sterling and undeniable claims to the musician’s homage.

‘As a melodist, chromatic harmonist, and orchestral scorist, Spohr shines pre-eminently. His airs have all the *cantabile* character, the sensuous, symmetrical beauty, and emotional eloquence of the best Italian masters, and these are ever enriched by constantly varying, though always appropriate and exquisitely-coloured, figures of accompaniment, all the transitions and confluent

parts being contrived with such cunning, that the most practised ear can rarely foretell what turn the composer's thoughts may be about to take; and thus each new change generally brings with it as much surprise as pleasure.

'Spohr's instrumentation is perfect. Clear and luminous as crystal, it reflects the author's meaning completely, and this is all that it should do, for orchestration is but a secondary and dependent art, and its greatest merit is that of giving adequate colouring to musical ideas whose real and essential expression must always exist only in melody and harmony. Orchestration, therefore, must necessarily vary with the character of the composition, and it would consequently be folly merely to compare the scoring of Spohr with that of any other writer. It will be enough to state that he is a complete master of orchestral resources, to prove his general superiority over all his contemporaries.

'But the merits of our author do not stop here. He is also master of the difficult art which the Italians call "*condotta*" — that which is to music what design is to painting. His illustrative powers are great; and, without losing sight of the true principle, which teaches that music should always be correctly written, and pleasing to the ear, before it can be worthy of the name of art, he always succeeds infinitely better in the expression of the passion and sentiments, in so-called picturesqueness of effect and dramatic colouring than any of his present German contemporaries of the æsthetical school.' At this point the article moves away from Spohr and on to a strong attack on the 'new music'.

Turning to the concert, *The Morning Post* says: 'Of such long and important works as Spohr's quartet and symphony, it is impossible to give a detailed account after a single audition. We must therefore confine ourselves to generalities. Both these compositions are perfectly novel in form, although one in spirit with other masterpieces by the same hand. They have all the known characteristics of the creator's style, and may be reckoned amongst the happiest efforts of his genius. In departing from established forms, Spohr has violated no principle of beauty; and the least of the merits of this new application of legitimate means is its novelty. It is far better to produce the beautiful in art than that which is merely original in construction; but to do both is best of all.

'There exist no precedents whatever for the peculiar instrumental distribution employed in the accompanied quartet and symphony under notice; and their novel form, therefore, all essential things being superlatively excellent, entitles them to the highest order of praise. It was necessary to make the quartet stand out in a kind of independence from the accompanying instruments, to make it complete in itself, though combined with an entire orchestra, over which it must still hold a ruling influence. We were to be enabled to say of it, reversing the sense of the celebrated line, "*Induitur formosa est; exuitur ipsa forma est*", applied by Aristenaeles to his mistress, "Beauteous unrobed, but robed it is beauty's self".

'It was also necessary to keep the two bands executing the symphony distinct from each other, to impart to them an independent and individual interest, even whilst playing simultaneously. These, it must be confessed, were no easy tasks, and when we consider that Spohr had no models to lean upon, nothing but his own inventive powers to prompt him, and that the results in both cases are such as must delight and instruct the musical world, too much eulogy can scarcely be bestowed upon him.

'The symphony is the greater composition of the two, and was most beautifully executed, the violin playing of Mr Cooper, who had very onerous duties to perform, being especially remarkable.

'The quartet did not go quite so well. The excessive heat of the room had probably some influence upon the intonation of the principal executants; and Mr Cooper's close proximity to

Spohr, himself one of the greatest violinists of any age or time, may possibly have made him a little nervous. Both the above mentioned works were most enthusiastically applauded.'

The review then covers the other works and notes: 'A finer rendering of Beethoven's symphony and overture than that given by the unsurpassable band of the society, conducted by Spohr, could not possibly be heard.'

*The Standard* also emerges as a pro-Spohr newspaper, though critical of programme music: 'The double symphony of Spohr, although played at the old Philharmonic Society, under the conductorship of Moscheles, in 1842, wore all the air of a novelty, and a most interesting one. The subject-matter, purporting to illustrate the operation and antagonism of the good and evil passions, seems, however, to be very remote from the descriptive means of music.

'How childhood, the growth of evil impulses, and the final triumph of piety over the moral warfare of middle life, admit of delineation by musical sounds, it would be hard to tell; but Spohr has had, at different periods of his career, a strong desire to resort to themes of a purely mental character, and this is a notable instance of his aspiring fancy in this respect.

'Abandoning, however, the specific name of the symphony, which, like that of the "historical" only engenders a species of criticism which can never be satisfied, the present work contains some very beautiful music, originating undoubtedly in certain distinct motives, but still in itself thoroughly poetical and abstract.

'The first movement, an adagio in C; the second, a larghetto in F, and the third, a presto in C minor, are alike admirable, without reference to the graceful gaiety which in the one professedly depicts infancy; the picturesque conflict which tells of manhood in the second; or the yearnings of a better nature, which is the assumed argument of the third. The several subjects are clear and vigorous, and if the listener is aware of the object of the composer, possess some kind of vague intelligibility. The treatment in all cases is rich and varied, and the effect, musically considered, is exquisite. The last-mentioned point is partly derived from the second orchestra, which represents the "godly" side of the symphony, and is assigned to the best instrumentalists; and the novelty of this device, chiefly realised by the entire separation of the group of players from the main body of their confrères, occasions some striking results.

'Altogether the symphony, the work of the most illustrious living musician in Europe, was well worthy the attention of the New Philharmonic Society. In practical merit and interest it exceeded previous expectation; and the presence of the composer, the respect due to his venerated name, and the masterly invention betrayed in the music, were appeals universally recognised by the auditory.

'The second symphony of Beethoven was capitally played; and the large orchestra, over which Spohr presided, evinced its completeness and its experience, its obedience and its decision, in every important particular. We never listened to a finer interpretation of this chef d'œuvre.'

The review later considers the Quartet-Concerto and says that it was 'more effective than might have been anticipated, for works of this class usually depend much upon being heard in an area where every shade of expression, every delicacy of tone, can reach the ear without difficulty. The present quartet has been written to meet these objections, and contains many beauties quite worthy of the genius from which so many compositions of the same *genre* have sprung. The adagio is a movement of undeniable loveliness. The performers, Mr Cooper, Mr Hennen, Herr Goffrie, and Signor Piatti, rendered every justice to the quartet, which at the end was very enthusiastically applauded.'

However, *The Daily News* was not so enthusiastic and no doubt reflects the views of the anti-Spohrists among the critics of the day: 'The chief objects of interest in this concert were the two compositions of Spohr; the Quartet with orchestral accompaniment, and the Symphony for two

orchestras. They are both of a singular description. The first is the only thing of its kind that has been written. It is intended to combine the effects of the chamber quartet and the orchestral symphony. The attempt is made with great skill, but we doubt if the result is such as will induce other composers to follow the example. In endeavouring to bring together two styles of composition essentially different, the peculiar effects of each are in some measure sacrificed. The quartet is often lost amid the fulness of the orchestra, while the composer is evidently restrained, by respect to the quartet, from giving to the orchestral parts the force and effect of the symphony.

‘The “Symphony for two orchestras”, we think, is a still greater mistake. It was performed at a concert of the Philharmonic Society a good many years ago; the prevailing opinion certainly was that it was not a successful effort, and such, we are pretty confident, will be the prevailing opinion now.

‘In the first place it is a misnomer to call it a symphony for two orchestras; for one of the so-called orchestras consists only of eleven performers, who are placed on one side, playing sometimes by themselves and sometimes mixed up with the whole. But there are never two great and distinct masses of sound such as would give the idea of two separate orchestras.

‘The design of the work, moreover, is quite beyond the reach of music. There is a great deal of what is called descriptive music; but this, we believe, is a solitary specimen of what we must denominate didactic or moral music. Its design we can only describe in the composer’s own very German phraseology. He calls the piece “The earthly and heavenly in the life of man”, and then he gives an argument of its subject.

‘He tells us that “in this symphony, the composer has tried to depict the contest of Good and Evil in the heart of man, with the final victory of Good.” It is in three movements. The first is an adagio: — “The child, in his innocent dream, is hardly conscious of the approach of temptation; and though enticed astray, is not wholly corrupted in his pure fresh thoughts.”

‘The next movement is a Larghetto: — “In the heart’s most religious or sublime sentiments, the wildest passions of eager strife soon mix, the man becomes withdrawn from high pursuits, follows the world, and thinks not of the future life.”

‘The last movement is a Presto: — “But, in the earthly-drawing chains, man’s better spirit will not become a prisoner; his genius wakes, admonishes him, and saves him.”

‘All these fine things we are told by means of crotchets and quavers, violins, basses, flutes, drums and trumpets! The “argument” reads like a piece of grave burlesque — a satire on the absurdities of German musical æsthetics; and as to the music itself, we would defy any one to discover the smallest relation between it and the moralities which it professes to teach. But, worse than this, the composer’s philosophical abstractions have not been favourable to his powers of imagination; for this symphony is the very coldest and driest of all his works.’ The review then covers the rest of the programme with no mention of Spohr as the conductor!

Two days before Spohr’s first concert with the New Philharmonic Society, the original Philharmonic Society gave the eighth and final one of its regular series on Monday June 27 at London’s Hanover Square Rooms, conducted by Michael Costa. Spohr was invited to be present and to mark the occasion the Society included the Historical Symphony and a duet from *Jessonda* in the programme.

Queen Victoria had also intended to be present at this concert but the unexpected arrival at Buckingham Palace of the Duke and Duchess of Saxe-Gotha obliged her to defer her visit and so an additional concert was arranged for July 4.

The June 27 concert, which also included Beethoven’s Symphony No.4, Molique’s Violin Concerto in D minor and Hiller’s Piano Concerto in F sharp minor along with a number of shorter pieces, was covered in *The Daily News* which reported rather positively on Spohr’s

symphony: 'Spohr's "Historical Symphony", we believe, was selected in compliment to the celebrated composer, who was invited to be present.

'It is called historical because the different movements are written in the style of different periods. The first movement belongs to the period of Bach and Handel, whose solid fugal counterpoint is very successfully imitated. The larghetto, in the style of Haydn and Mozart, is a clear, melodious movement, exceedingly grateful to the ear. The scherzo is in the rapid, impetuous form invented by Beethoven; and the *finale* is in the brilliant, theatrical style of the present day. This *finale* seems meant to caricature the use of the noisy instruments now in fashion; but it is very clever and effective.' It concluded by noting: 'The room was exceedingly full. When it was discovered that Spohr was present, the whole audience rose, and, turning to him, applauded for several minutes.'

*The Standard* was less complimentary but dealt with the symphony at much greater length: 'The expected presence of Spohr at this concert was the immediate occasion, we believe, of the selection of the symphony which commenced the programme. This was hardly a sufficient reason for playing one of the least interesting orchestral works which bears the name of this illustrious composer.

'The intention has been to imitate the periods of Bach and Handel, of Haydn and Mozart, of Beethoven, and of the modern school. Spohr has too much individuality in him to be a successful imitator. He assumes certain outlines, which bear mechanical affinity to the writers whom he proposes to reflect; but he has coloured them in his own peculiar manner, the style of the masters in question being either lost, or but faintly shadowed, in himself.

'The movement in G, which purposes to depict the manner of Bach and Handel, contains a clearly-written fugue and an air — akin, as it is probably intended to be, to the pastoral symphony in the *Messiah*. This section is, perhaps, the most felicitous of the four. The second, in E flat, a larghetto, represents Spohr rather than Haydn or Mozart, and if we take it as such it is beautiful; but viewed as an imitative effort, is a failure.

'If the larghetto is unlike the two great masters who are professedly typified, the scherzo in G minor, excepting in certain quaintnesses of expression, is equally remote from Beethoven, and as equally near Spohr; while the allegro in G, which constitutes the finale, is a pot pourri of common places, intended to satirise the flippancy of the modern French and Italian schools, but concealing the grace and elegance which are as often visible both in the one and the other.

'The first three movements, taken without reference to the motive which originated them, are charming in their way, and — the second in particular — replete with many delicious Spohrisms. The great symphony of Beethoven which commenced the second act of the concert was a reality, which showed how vain was the "historical" imitation which had proceeded it; and faultlessly for the most part was it performed.

'We never heard, we think, the two adagios given with more perfect finish; though the same may almost be said of every part of the performance. The Historical Symphony, we might also have observed, was rendered with the greatest truth and force. The presence of the illustrious composer inspired the players with unceasing diligence; and as a piece of executancy, nothing further could be desired.

'The applause which was bestowed at the conclusion was addressed chiefly to the composer, who was sitting near the extreme end of the room, and who rose and bowed, in his own homely manner, to the company around him.'

In all of the newspaper reviews examined here, we can see the anomalous reaction to Spohr's later works. On the one hand, there is the reverence and respect due to a composer with such a great reputation plus a search for positive things to praise; but on the other, there is the

disinclination to follow Spohr into his experiments with new forms and procedures. This is partly because the London critics were stuck so firmly in their adulation of Beethoven and Mendelssohn that any composer who ventured at all far from their examples had them baffled.

This can be seen with the English première of Schumann's *Overture, Scherzo and Finale* which was performed on April 4 some weeks before Spohr arrived in London. *The Examiner* said it was 'one of those very mediocre attempts [...] in which it would be difficult to point out any particular faults, but in which nothing is found to commend, much less to admire.'

*The Standard* was even more severe. It said that the *Overture* was 'as dry as the driest writing could make it [...] containing nothing of the slightest moment'; the *Scherzo* was 'simply a piece of empty flippancy'; and the *Finale* with its 'disjointed slabs of sound, unsymmetrical and incoherent', was 'remarkable only for its vulgarity.'

As for Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*, conducted by the composer on May 30, *The Examiner* said: 'We cannot in conscience occupy the valuable space in our paper to the exclusion of matter so much more important, by any further notice of works the merits of which, whatever they may be, have not been disclosed to us.' So we can see that Spohr was in good company at the hands and pens of these 1853 London critics.

Incidentally, the New Philharmonic Society certainly inspired the rival older society to take stock of its position. In its coverage of Spohr's final concert, *The Morning Post* commented: 'This new society has been productive of much good; for not only have its own concerts been uniformly of the highest character, but to its well-directed activity must be wholly ascribed the recent extraordinary energy of the older institution, whose spirited acts during the last few months excited astonishment, no less than approbation, in the musical world.' In fact, the old society recovered so well over the next two and a half decades that the new one lasted only until 1879.

#### Footnote

The newspaper reports from which the above quotations have been extracted appeared as follows:

Philharmonic Society concert of Monday April 4: *The Standard* April 5; *The Examiner* April 9.

Philharmonic Society concert of Monday May 30: *The Examiner* June 4.

Philharmonic Society concert of Monday June 27: *The Daily News* June 28; *The Standard* June 28.

New Philharmonic Society concert of Wednesday June 29: *The Standard* June 30; *The Morning Post* July 4.

New Philharmonic Society concert of Friday July 8: *The Daily News* July 9; *The Morning Post* July 9; *The Standard* July 9.