

AN ENGLISH OBITUARY OF SPOHR

by Tony Brown

FOLLOWING the death of Spohr in 1859, obituaries of course appeared in newspapers and magazines throughout Europe and other places in the world where classical music was played. The obituary in *The Illustrated London News* of November 12, 1859, has been chosen for inclusion here as a representative sample of the British reaction to Spohr's death and also because, in line with the title of the magazine, a portrait of the composer was published which is reproduced on the cover of this *Spohr Journal*.

The interest for us at the present day is the evaluation of Spohr's achievement as expressed in this obituary. It confirms the high esteem we know that the British held for Spohr's choral works by stating that his finest contributions to the art of music are the three great oratorios, followed by his operas.

In addition, the obituary makes what to us will seem the remarkable claim that his series of masterpieces was surpassed only by those of Mozart. In contrast, his orchestral and instrumental compositions are only mentioned in passing and not one of them is picked out for special comment.

By the way, *The Illustrated London News* certainly kept well abreast of German artistic matters. While the passing of Spohr was being mourned, Germans were also celebrating the life of poet and dramatist Friedrich Schiller. The same number of the magazine noted: 'The Schiller Centenary Festival has been celebrated throughout Germany on a grand scale; and in other countries, especially in England and in France, honour has been paid to the great German poet.'

Schiller had been born on November 10, 1759 but his death on May 9, 1805 meant that by the time Spohr had moved to Gotha in October of that year, it was too late for the two to have met in the nearby town of Weimar where Schiller, along with Goethe, was a leading light.

A number of biographical errors appear in this Spohr obituary but they are here allowed to stand though the major ones are corrected in square brackets. The obituary reads (punctuation as in the original):

LOUIS SPOHR

THIS illustrious musician died at Cassel on the 22nd of October, after an illness of a few days, in his seventy-sixth year. He was born on the 5th of April, 1784, at Seesen, in the duchy of Brunswick [he was born in Brunswick/Braunschweig and moved to nearby Seesen in 1787], where his father was an eminent surgeon [he went to Seesen as district physician].

His genius was not precocious, like that of many great artists, but it showed itself early enough to convince his father that he was destined to be a musician, and he received a professional education accordingly.

He first distinguished himself as a violinist, in which capacity he entered the service of the Duke of Brunswick. In 1805 he became Kapellmeister to the Duke of Saxe-Gotha, and from that period he began to be celebrated as a composer. His earliest works were chiefly instrumental — symphonies [he composed no symphonies until 1811], quartets, and concertos for the violin, on which he had become an unrivalled performer.

In 1813 he was chosen musical director [orchestral leader] of the German Opera House at Vienna [Theater an der Wien] — an appointment which led him to dramatic composition [he had already composed three operas, the third of which had been staged in Hamburg in 1811]. He then

produced his celebrated opera, "Faust," which was followed by a series of master-pieces, surpassed only by those of Mozart, among which "Jessonda" and "Zemire und Azor" are well known to the English public. Of his other dramatic works, the "Berg-geist" and "Alchymist," though never performed in this country, are known to the public by their overtures, and other pieces performed at concerts.

But it is, perhaps, as a composer of sacred music that Spohr has gained his highest and most enduring reputation. His three great oratorios — "The Last Judgment," "The Crucifixion," [later and better known in England as "Calvary"] and "The Fall of Babylon" — were all, we believe, first made known to the English public by their production at the Norwich Festivals. At one of these the performance of "The Crucifixion" was conducted by the composer in person; and for another of them "The Fall of Babylon" was expressly written, and its performance would have been again conducted by himself had not the Elector of Hesse Cassel refused him the necessary leave of absence.

Spohr has frequently visited England. His first visit was in 1819 [this should read 1820], when his performances on the violin were the subject of unbounded admiration. His last visit was in 1853, when he conducted the performance of several of his orchestral pieces at the concerts of the New Philharmonic Society.

He was present one evening when his "Historical Symphony" was performed at a concert of the Philharmonic Society, and, being recognised by the audience, he was hailed by a burst of enthusiasm from every part of the room. In the private musical society of London he always excited the greatest interest.

His quiet and seemingly phlegmatic manner was found to cover a highly cultivated mind and a genial and kindly disposition. In matters of professional business he was disinterested and unworldly in a degree scarcely ever met with.

Spohr's life was that of a quiet, retiring artist, marked by no other events than the production of his works and the triumphs which he derived from them. For nearly the last forty years he resided at Cassel, in the capacity of Kapellmeister to the Grand Duke, a post which he resigned about two years ago [Spohr was 'retired' against his will].

As soon as the intelligence of Spohr's death reached Brunswick his two brothers — one the father of the Countess Sauerma (better known as the celebrated harpist, Rosalie Spohr), the other assessor of the Ducal Chambers, both residents — hastened to Hesse Cassel, and were present at the last services paid to the illustrious master.

The funeral of the great composer was marked by many reverential tokens, honourable alike to the living and the dead. The Prince Electoral of Hesse Cassel gave orders to his Court Marshal to arrange the whole of the procession; and the Queen of Hanover sent palm and laurel branches to decorate the sarcophagus. The choruses of the funeral service were executed by the leading members of the Opera and the Grand Ducal Chapel.

Pupils of Dr Spohr scattered all over Germany arrived at various stages of the ceremony to pay their last tribute to their master, one or two coming from Holland.

Footnote

At the time this obituary appeared, Spohr's *Autobiography* had still to be published, so the statement made above that his life was marked by no other events than the composition of his works was based on what little was then known about Spohr's life in general.

In addition, the view that Spohr was unworldly to a degree scarcely ever met with and disinterested in business matters is disproved by the knowledge later revealed of his dealings with publishers as well as his negotiations for his various musical posts.