

# SOME NOTES ON THE SPOHR REVIVAL

by Keith Warsop

WHEN we speak of the present-day Spohr revival we do not mean to suggest that the Berlin, New York or Vienna philharmonics are playing his symphonies; that La Scala, the New York Met or Covent Garden are staging his operas; that the world's top violinists are performing his concertos; or that star string quartets are turning to the chamber music. Instead, what we are looking at is more in the nature of a grass-roots revival.

For instance, in Britain since the Spohr anniversary year of 2009, the Second Symphony has featured in concerts by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Halifax's Orchestra of Square Chapel and the Kingston Chamber Orchestra (at Kingston-upon-Thames) while the Halifax orchestra in a later concert included the Quartet-Concerto.

In Germany and Switzerland, the oratorios, especially *Die letzten Dinge*, have been revived by around a dozen choral societies and this work, as *The Last Judgment*, has also been performed at Oxford in England.

The Cambridge University Musical Society Chorus are also taking on this once-popular oratorio in March, 2016, with performances in both Cambridge and London while the same month will see the Thanet Festival Choir joining in with a concert in Cliftonville, near Margate in Kent.

Of course, some works are played by world-ranking artists; the C minor fantasia, Op.35, is a staple solo piece of the international harp repertoire; the songs with clarinet, Op.103, also turn up frequently, no doubt because, having hired a clarinettist for Schubert's 'The Shepherd on the Rock', the concert promoters want something else with clarinet to go with it.

Top of the list, of course, is the Nonet which has never really dropped out of the repertoire even when hardly anything else by Spohr was being played, but its companion works, the Octet, Septet and Piano and Wind Quintet as well as the Notturmo are these days proving quite attractive too.

Looking at the violin concertos, the Eighth, the *Gesangsszene*, appears in concerts on a number of occasions with Hilary Hahn being one of its champions, but so far none of the others has caught the attention of soloists, though a reputation is surely waiting to be made by any violinists taking into their repertoire such works as the Fifth, Seventh, Ninth and Eleventh. As for the clarinet concertos, we have the odd-looking situation where clarinettists appear to be queuing up to record them but few of these virtuosi seem brave enough to face the risk of taking on these technically challenging compositions in live performances.

In 2009, there was obviously a special reason why Spohr might have featured in concerts but since then the impetus given by the 150th anniversary of the composer's death has not been lost. We note the following places at least where Spohr has been in concert programmes from 2010 to date, though no doubt there have been many more, especially in Germany, which we have overlooked:

**BRITAIN:** Bracknell, Bradford-on-Avon, Bromley, Cardiff, Cowbridge (in Glamorgan), Doncaster, Edinburgh, Halifax, Inverurie (in Scotland), Kingston-upon-Thames, Leamington Spa, Leeds, London, Macclesfield, Manchester, Melrose (in Scotland), Norwich, Nottingham, Oxford, Portsmouth, Sheffield, Sydenham, Torbay and Winchester.

**UNITED STATES:** Alaska, Albuquerque, Denver, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, San Francisco, Santa Fe, Toledo (Ohio), Virginia and Washington.

**EUROPE:** Belgium: Antwerp; France: Doubs, Nice; Germany: Baden-Baden, Bremen, Dresden, Kassel, Neuberg (Bavaria), Neustrelitz; Ireland: Sligo; Italy: Florence; Netherlands: Amsterdam; Poland: Warsaw; Romania: Bucharest, Sibiu; Spain: Mendigorrial.

**ELSEWHERE:** Azerbaijan; Australia: Melbourne; Brazil; Malta.

In contrast to the concert scene, matters are completely different when it comes to recordings as all of Spohr's major orchestral and chamber works have been issued on commercial compact discs, several of them in two or more different versions.

Only two of the mature operas, *Pietro von Abano* and *Die Kreuzfahrer*, remain unrecorded but it will probably take a live performance, either on stage or in a concert version, before a recording could become economically realistic.

Although the three mature oratorios are on CD, two large-scale choral works remain without a recording. This is probably because neither the 1812 oratorio *Das jüngste Gericht*, nor the 1814 cantata *Das befreite Deutschland*, has ever been published though work is currently in progress on editions for both of them.

In addition, Spohr's smaller choral works as well as the part-songs are completely neglected though a reasonable selection of the Lieder has been recorded.

This dichotomy between the relatively sparse live performances of Spohr's works and the massive revival of them in recordings is symptomatic of the wide split between the sort of music loved by concert audiences and that acquired by record collectors.

The former in general are relatively conservative in their tastes and concert promoters find that only the so-called standard classics prove attractive and profitable. On the other hand, collectors are far more adventurous so that a number of record labels have found it good business to cater for their enthusiasms, the result being that a substantial number of composers who are all but ignored in the concert hall can boast comprehensive discographies.

Hummel, for instance, whose music features strongly in the record catalogues, has only his Trumpet Concerto to thank for his appearance in concert programmes and the same goes for Arnold Bax, through his tone poem *Tintagel*, though there have been three recorded cycles of his seven symphonies. Even Raff, who never shows up in live concerts, has two CD cycles of his 11 symphonies available.

The list could be extended easily: such composers as the sons of Bach, Boccherini, Havergal Brian, Casella, Kalliwoda, Joseph Martin Kraus, Locatelli, Malipiero, Myaskovsky, Ferdinand Ries, Stenhammar, Vanhal and many more have a considerable number of recordings devoted to their music.

It is as if there are almost two musical cultures living side by side; the live and the recorded. Perhaps the split is driven by economic reasons or perhaps it is because record collectors are happier sitting comfortably at home listening to their discs on first-class equipment rather than venturing out to concerts. The question therefore remains; would Spohr enthusiasts in sufficient numbers desert their hi-fi recordings of the composer in order to hear his works performed live?

As it is, in contrast to many of the composers who have just been discussed, Spohr is experiencing something of a revival in concerts, though it is limited to the sort of ensembles noted earlier.

Strangely, this mini-revival has not yet forced its way on to the BBC which was once an oasis for Spohr lovers who heard broadcasts of many works which were then unrecorded and had no chance of turning up in live concerts. Sadly, the BBC has now in the main turned its back on the composer except when performers like the Nash Ensemble who have the Nonet in their repertoire include it in their broadcast concerts.

Otherwise the BBC is outflanked by Classic FM which has been playing recordings of the

clarinet concertos in particular but has also featured some of Howard Shelley's symphony discs for Hyperion.

One other arm of this 'return of the forgotten master' is the publication of new editions of the music, either scholarly volumes such as the symphonies and concert overtures edited by Bert Hagels for Ries & Erler, the complete Lieder edited by Susan Owen-Leinert and Michael Leinert for Edition Dohr, some previously unpublished pieces edited by Wolfram Boder for Edition Merseburger, facsimiles of nineteenth century chamber music editions from Merton Music or free internet downloads of out-of-copyright material. These publications can only fuel the current rediscovery of Spohr by many musicians who have been captivated by the music they have lighted on and are determined to explore further.

Musicologists too have been investigating Spohr in some numbers and there has been a welcome increase in additions to his bibliography since 1984, spearheaded by Clive Brown's now classic life and works volume which more recently has been available in German, thanks to Wolfram Boder's translation for Edition Merseburger.

Dr Boder himself has been responsible for a comprehensive study of Spohr's Kassel operas and there has been an equally full treatment of the Lieder from Simon Moser while dissertations have included the violin concertos, the programme symphonies and much else. We must also not neglect to mention Clive Brown's Spohr entry in the 2001 edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* which brings a much more positive take to the evaluation of the composer than the various earlier editions.

However, we must conclude with a warning note; all the evidence points to the standard concert repertoire retrenching even further into its world of 'core classics' and Spohr lovers may therefore have to be content with what we have at the moment — to hope that the super-stars of the music world can be converted to Spohr would be like crying for the moon.