

GELIEBTE DORETTE

by Maria Christina Cleary

The author, who specialises on historical harps, has recently been awarded a Ph.D. from the University of Leiden, The Netherlands, on historical pedal techniques and Dorette Spohr's pedal techniques. She holds the position of historical harp professor in Verona Conservatory, Italy, and teaches at the Urbino Summer Music Course.

SINCE 2003 Davide Monti and I have been playing and interpreting Spohr's music for violin and harp. This has become part of our life together, resulting in performing and recording two CDs of the extant works on period instruments and using historical performance practices. Our Stradivarius CD STR33848 *So mach' die Augen zu* was the first recording of Spohr's harp music using period instruments and historical performing practice. A further Stradivarius CD *Adorata Dorette/Geliebte Dorette* which includes the Spohr harp works not on our first disc is due for release this month, December. I have also completed a Ph.D. thesis around Dorothée Henriette Scheidler (1787-1834), commonly called Dorette, and her pedalling technique.

The repertoire of Dorette Spohr

In her first documented public concerts in 1802, Dorette performed an anonymous set of variations on the harp and harp concertos by Kleeberg and Backofen. On the piano, she played Mozart's two-piano concerto with Caroline Schlick and accompanied her mother in an aria by Mozart. Johann Georg Heinrich Backofen (1768-1855), clarinettist, basset hornist and harpist at the Gotha court, is named in Louis Spohr's autobiography as her teacher, but Dorette may have been already playing the harp before Backofen arrived in Gotha.

If we assume that Backofen was Dorette's teacher, then she would have known his harp method and his various compositions for the *harp organisée*¹ which includes a Fantaisie very similar to Spohr's Op.35, the Concerto in B flat major and the *Suite de l'Etude pour le Harpe*, a set of ten short preludes. Acutally, most of Backofen's other compositions were published for the German *Hakenharfe*, which was undoubtedly the most common type of harp in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century, before the French *harp organisée* became the standard instrument.

When the Spohrs began playing together they had, as Wulforth describes it "no useful model" of chamber works for musicians of their capabilities². In fact, the first time they shared a concert platform in 1805, they did not play together. One can only surmise that when the Spohrs began making music together, they may have experimented with playing violin and piano sonatas on the harp. In order to satisfy their artistry as two virtuoso players, they needed to create their own genre of music. From 1805-1820 Louis, with the close collaboration of Dorette, wrote at least 22 works and two fragments for her, in which 18 of these are for the harp and the remaining ones are original works or arrangements for piano.

Dorette's harp techniques including double-pedalling techniques

On the *harp organisée*, the pedals are the most important part of the playing, as it is they that produce over half of the pitches on the harp. The pedals are moved by the whole foot completely off the floor, at the moment where an accidental is notated in the music, then released immediately. Pedalling becomes an inherent part of the musical gesture and not a mere mechanical obligation. The foot-moves and the harmonic developments are in concordance with each other. For this reason, pedal markings are hardly ever found in harp music before 1820.

Backofen's method, *Anleitung zum Harfenspiel* (1801), is the earliest publication that describes double-pedalling techniques, which means moving two adjacent pedals or two non-adjacent pedals on one side of the harp using one foot. This is achieved by placing the foot perpendicular to the harp, across the pedals. The pedals can be pressed down together where the heel moves an inner pedal and the toe moves an outer pedal. When the pedals are not adjacent to each other, double-pedalling is achieved by folding away a pedal, usually the C pedal on the left side or the F or G pedals on the right side of the base of the

harp. The remaining D and B pedals on the left-hand side of the harp and the F and A pedals on the right can then be operated with one foot. The concerto by Backofen, which was part of Dorette's repertoire, indicates in the score where to use double-peddalling and where to use the left foot to move the E pedal on the right-hand side of the pedal box.

The compositional style of the Spohrs' music is inherently based on these pedal techniques. However, to play this music in a historically informed way, the harpist is also required to use the heel and toe to operate two pedals separately with a pivoting motion, which are implied in the musical score. From the early sonatas, Op.16, and WoO.23, Louis experimented more and more with double-peddalling, and heel and toe pivoting movements, employing over 37 core pedal moves in his entire opus for the harp. The pieces can be chronologically ordered as he gradually augmented the quantity of complex double-peddalling combinations.

These intricate and subtle foot movements culminate in Op.115, which contains the most complex pedal moves of any piece written for the *harp organisée*. Sometimes, the harpist needs to fold or unfold pedals (usually the C and G pedals) during a piece. The harpist has ample time to fold or unfold a pedal as there is often at least one bar's rest in the harp part, or the texture of the harp part thins out right when a pedal needs to be folded or unfolded. The rhetorical silences in the music are the implicit clue to Spohr's harp compositional style and Dorette's pedal technique.

Another pedal technique that is found throughout these works is the use of the pedal *glissando*. If a string is plucked and then the pedal is pressed down or released, the pedal movement creates another sounding note, either a semitone higher or lower, where no intermediary pitches between one semitone and another are audible. The second note, when 'played' by the pedal, is invariably softer as it is only produced from the vibrations of the string. The resulting articulation produced is a natural slur, where the first note is strong and the second note is weak.

In his autobiography, Louis describes how his compositional style for the harp developed, alongside the 'effects' that Dorette was able to achieve on the harp. The sonata Op.113 employs double-peddalling, as described in the contemporary harp methods and a handful of pieces. However, from this work onwards, the pieces also ask for double-peddalling with the left foot on non-adjacent pedals.

One wonders if the new 'effects' that he is referring to are new pedal movements that no one else had asked a harpist to perform before. The word 'effect' would normally refer to special techniques like harmonics, *etouffés* which Spohr uses rarely in his music. What is truly new, as an effect, is the complex and difficult nature of the music: fiendishly hard compositions for the harp with complex chromatic harmonies, series' of diminished seventh chords and modulations that all become surprisingly easy when historical pedalling is employed.

Dorette's harps

Dorette first owned a harp made in Strasbourg, which she had received from the Duchess of Brunswick-Lüneburg as a gift. This harp was probably built by the 18th century Storck atelier. Between June 1806 and October 1807 the Spohrs bought a Henri Naderman harp from Paris, most likely with 41 strings, with a range from F1 to d4 (according to the Helmholtz pitch notation system) and built for a pitch between A=425-430Hz. Dorette used this *harp organisée*.

Tuning and the harp

Spohr wrote his first two complete sonatas, WoO.23 and Op.16, in the same key for the violin and harp. He then devised a system of writing for the harp as a transposing instrument and used it subsequently for all his violin and harp duos. In the often-quoted text, Spohr (*Lebenserinnerung*, 98) points to the practical reason of tuning the instruments at two different pitches. Writing in the key A flat major, or its relative minor, as the 'base' set-up key on the harp means that four out of seven strings are in the 'open' position, so the harp sounds better and is more likely in tune. This key becomes the most used 'base' set-up tune in Spohr's compositions.

There are two other advantages to this system, the first being that when the harp is set-up in the 'base' key of A flat major, it is possible to exploit double-peddalling techniques on both sides of the harp. A further reasoning may partly concern 19th century thinking on the special characteristics of each key in music. Each major and minor key, as much as each interval in music, had its own characteristics, each evoking a certain passion, mood and colour.

Dorette's extraordinary pedalling technique hastens the end of her career

On the way to London in February 1820, the Spohrs decided to leave Dorette's Naderman harp in Brussels, as they planned to purchase a new Erard harp there. When they arrived, the Spohrs visited the Erard company and borrowed a small harp with a double-action pedal mechanism. This type of harp was patented between 1800-1810 and has seven pedals which alter each string by two semitones and is still the standard type of pedal harp.

Dorette struggled with this new harp and her career ended in London. Louis attributes this end to her frail health and the difficulties she experienced trying to adapt to the Erard instrument. These difficulties would have included the size of the instrument, the string spacing, a higher pitched instrument, the increased tension on the strings and heavier pedal springs requiring extra muscular strength in the hands and feet.

However, my research shows that the principal obstacle for Dorette was that her husband's compositions, which had been conceived specifically for her extraordinary pedalling abilities, could not be transferred to the double-action pedal harp. Moving two non-adjacent pedals with the left foot could still be achieved, but not those with the right foot. This is due to the fact that on the double-action pedal harp D flat and B flat can be moved together to achieve D natural and B natural, whereas moving F natural and A flat to become F sharp and A natural is much more difficult as these pedals are on different planes when creating these pitches, as is not the case on the *harp organisée*.

In the first public concert at the Argyll Rooms in London on June 8, 1820, it is not known exactly which sonata the Spohrs performed. Piecing historical information together, the couple may have played the Sonata, WoO.36, in G major for the violin and A flat major for the harp, written in 1819, which is currently lost. Considering the key of this sonata and the probable set-up 'base' key of the harp, it most surely involved double-peddalling with both feet, like most of Dorette's repertoire.

Another issue was Spohr's use of the harp as a transposing instrument. How they resolved this on their English tour is not known. After her battles with trying to translate double-peddalling moves from one type of harp to the other, perhaps Dorette attempted to re-learn her harp parts in the same key as the violin parts. She already had performed the second movement of Op.114 and the final Rondo movement of Op.115 on the piano in the same keys as the violin.

This music remains obscure, due to the use of the harp as a transposing instrument and to the fact that without certain double-peddalling techniques, these pieces, as notated in the scores, seem impossible to play on any pedal harp. The invention of the new Erard double-action pedal harp did not popularise Spohr's music, but actually hindered the diffusion of his works.

Notes

1. *Harp organisée*: Diderot's term to describe the pedal harp of the 18th century, the first harp with seven pedals which can alter the pitch of each string by one semitone.
2. Wulfhorst, Martin. *Louis Spohr's Early Chamber Music (1796-1812): A Contribution to the History of Nineteenth-Century Genres*. Ph.D Dissertation in Music (Musicology), City University of New York, 1995.