

## FAUST

by Christopher Tutt

Of all the works which support our claim that Spohr is a significant composer perhaps the most important is the opera 'Faust'. No other work of his surpasses it in power of expression and abundance of new ideas. He developed and refined his techniques in his later works, but never again did he make such a great leap forward. Even when Spohr's name had fallen into virtual oblivion thirty or forty years ago, 'Faust' as a pioneer work of German Romantic Opera kept its place in the history books. A certain amount of Spohr's chamber music has now re-emerged, but still far too little is known of his achievements as an opera composer.

When in 1813 the young Viennese writer Johann Karl Bernard offered Spohr his version of the Faust legend as a libretto, the composer had already made three unsuccessful attempts at writing operas. His most recent one 'Der Zweikampf mit der Geliebten' had been produced in Hamburg in November 1811 and the work had been well received. His musical friends there congratulated him warmly and indeed they had much to admire. 'Der Zweikampf' had a wealth of charming melody and several novel features of orchestral texture and harmony. Nevertheless Spohr was already dissatisfied with his work, feeling that the music not only included too many reminiscences of Mozart, (see note I), but also was too static and undramatic in character. He was determined to overcome these faults in his next opera.

Bernard's 'Faust' libretto gave Spohr the opportunity he was looking for. The main parts, particularly that of Faust himself, are skilfully characterised and each scene builds up to a gripping climax. The opera opens with Faust complaining to Mephistopheles that he has had enough of revelry and declaring that in future he will use his magical powers

to perform great deeds. He is determined to marry Röschen, a simple-hearted girl he has abandoned, to restore her honour. His fresh approaches to Röschen anger her fiance Franz, who pursues him with a squad of constables. The first scene ends with Faust escaping up a chimney with Mephisto's help.

In the next scene we meet the other heroine Kunigunde, a high born lady, who has been kidnapped by the villainous knight Gulf. Faust and Mephistopheles help her fiance Hugo to rescue her and punish Gulf. Faust, after his gallant action, however, is filled with lust for the beautiful countess and goes to some witches on the Blocksberg to obtain a love potion. He is invited to Kunigunde and Hugo's wedding feast and soon begins exercising his charm on her. Hugo becomes jealous and is killed by Faust in the fight that ensues. In the final scene Faust is abandoned by his former friends, Röschen and Kunigunde both commit suicide and Mephistopheles summons his attendant spirits to seize Faust and drag him down to hell.

Spohr set to work with great enthusiasm and in September 1813 he had finished the score after less than four months' work on it. He had of course hoped to stage the opera at the Theater an der Wien, where he was at that time the Musical Director, but the proprietor Count Palffy did not care for it and refused him permission to put it on. The opera was in fact given its first performance by Weber in Prague in 1816. Spohr himself was not able to produce it until March 1818 in Frankfurt. It had considerable success, though not as great as that of 'Jessonda' (see note 2). This original version of the opera had spoken dialogue between the numbers and was divided into 2 acts. In 1852 Spohr revised the opera, replacing the dialogue by recitative, so that it could be performed as a Grand Opera at Covent Garden at the request of Queen Victoria. At first the new version had wide success, but it was later eclipsed by the superficially more attractive opera of Gounod, which appeared in 1859.

For the original version of 1813 Spohr made full use of the dramatic possibilities of the text and his own maturing powers as a composer. His music now had a distinct character of its own, though it still owed something to his heroes, Mozart and Cherubini, (see note 3). Spohr had developed those harmonic features that were typical of his mature style, plentiful use of suspensions, chromatic movement of the middle parts, extensive use of the diminished seventh and freedom in modulation. In some later works these were used to excess, but here they are employed to masterly effect to heighten the drama. The chromaticism is not all pervasive; it gains in effectiveness through being set against considerable stretches of straightforwardly diatonic music. The vocal score of the second version brings out clearly how much more chromaticism is used in the recitatives of 1852, though these also contain some fine dramatic music. The handling of rhythm was not always a strong point in Spohr's music and the pulse could become sluggish at times, but in 'Faust' he achieves in key scenes a rhythmic vitality worthy of Beethoven. In melody there is great beauty in some of the lyrical numbers comparable with the best of his concerto slow movements and some very expressive arioso writing in the dramatic scenes. There is skilful handling of the orchestra throughout with both powerful use of the full orchestra and delicate chamber music type scoring in quieter passages.

One major weakness of the score lies in the handling of some of the voice parts. Spohr's experience of vocal writing at this time was still fairly limited compared with his mastery of instrumental technique. He himself admitted in the Autobiography that he had still not fully understood the limitations of the human voice and as a result had written some very awkward passages for the singers. It was normal then to provide the soloists with some opportunities for display, so Spohr had written some brilliant passage work, particularly for Faust and Kunigunde. Unfortunately he slipped too easily into the manner of his violin concertos without regard for how it could be sung. In his later operas he shows

far more understanding of vocal technique. So, for a successful revival of 'Faust' to be launched, singers with superlative technique and compass would be required for these parts.

In spite of the difficulties mentioned above, the part of Faust is perhaps the finest piece of characterisation in the whole of Spohr's output. He brings out to the full the contrast between Faust's nobler aspirations and his unscrupulous lust for power and pleasure. Although the opera is based on a different version of the legend, Spohr must have been influenced by Goethe's 'Faust' part one, which was published in 1808. Spohr himself had met Goethe in 1807 and two years later he included in his Six German Songs, opus 25, a setting of 'Gretchen am Spinnrade'. In the first scene of the opera 'Faust', the hero expresses his weariness and disgust at the life of pleasure-seeking he has been indulging in and this is brought out well in the free flowing, wide ranging lines of his duet with Mephistopheles. His true affection for Röschen is beautifully expressed in the aria 'Liebe ist die zarte Blüthe', written for the 1818 production, and in their duet later in the same scene. His big scene and aria in Act Two, however, reveals his split personality and unrestrained lust. Unlike the first aria with its regular ABA form, this is free in construction with several expressive changes of tempo and key, but bound together by the orchestral semiquaver figure that also dominates the overture. Faust also stands out as a powerful personality in the ensembles and finales. In the closing scene of the opera his growing despair as he realises that he cannot escape from Mephisto's clutches is convincingly portrayed. Mephisto himself is a more conventional figure, a typical operatic villain, and has only one aria. He does not come to the fore until Act Three.

The two female parts are well contrasted and in their likeness to Donna Anna and Zerlina provide one of several resemblances to Mozart's 'Don Giovanni'. Spohr portrays Kunigunde's pride and higher social position in a traditional way through several big scenes and arias. These are formally laid out with brilliant passages in the slow parts. Her first scene does have more daring passages early on, which represent her vision of Hugo, who she supposes to be dead, in a dramatic arioso. Röschen on the other hand, who has some resemblance to Goethe's Gretchen, is given simpler vocal lines to express her good nature and her love for Faust. Her distress at Faust's desertion of her is movingly expressed in a short trio with Franz and Mephisto and in the beautiful Cavatina she sings after catching a glimpse of Faust at the wedding of Hugo and Kunigunde.

The most striking and original part of the opera is the Blocksberg scene at the beginning of Act Two. There is a short orchestral prelude which sets the sinister mood in the key of B minor, a long way from the C major at the start of the overture. The themes, instrumentation and harmony all contribute to a sound picture which was remarkably novel at the time and inspired colleagues and successors like Weber, Marschner and Mendelssohn. There is very effective writing for the chorus of witches. Some of this material reappears in the prelude to Act Three which was newly composed for the 1852 version when the original two acts were altered to three. Another significant feature of the opera is the use of themes with symbolic meaning, precursors of the Wagnerian Leitmotiv. These are more than mere reminiscences of earlier numbers. They are short thematic fragments which can be altered to suit the mood and tempo of different numbers and retain a recognisable shape. Two of these themes make an appearance in the overture, a rushing figure of semiquavers, which represents Faust's boundless ambition and a gentle lyrical theme representing Röschen and his love for her. The first of these reappears in his big aria in Act Two and in a scene in Act Three. The Röschen motive is woven into his Act One aria; it reappears in Act Three in his accompanied scene and several times in the Finale. There are two other themes used in a similar way to represent the powers of evil. This use

of the Leitmotiv made a strong impression on Weber when he produced the opera in 1816 and he developed this idea in his own later operas particularly 'Euryanthe'. Spohr himself used this technique again, but did not surpass his achievement here.

'Faust' also shows a great advance on its predecessors in its formal construction, especially in the finales, which show a masterly fusion of form and content. These are placed with fine judgement at the dramatic high points of the story and show a flexible handling of the soloists and chorus. A wide range of mood is covered inspite of Spohr's abandonment of the comic characters found in his earlier operas. The drinking song of Faust's companions in Act One Scene One is the nearest approach to the 'Singspiel' tradition. There is an impressive chorale in the church scene in Act Two, foreshadowing many similar scenes in later operas, and the festive polonaise that sets the scene for the wedding feast was a great success with audiences. The most static parts of the opera are the big formal arias mentioned earlier, but these would still make an impact, if sung with sufficient conviction and technique.

Spohr was not a man of the theatre in the way that Weber, Wagner and many of the successful Italian and French operatic composers were, but it is not always realised how important opera was in his creative life. Though he himself had doubts about his capabilities as a dramatic composer, he had a determination equal to that of Weber to improve standards in German opera houses and to create a truly German type of opera. 'Faust' was his first great achievement on this path and after its production in Frankfurt he pressed ahead with further operatic ventures, composing a new opera every two or three years until 1830. After his great success with 'Jessonda' in 1823 it was all the more disappointing to him that its successors did not catch on with the operatic public inspite of their further technical advances. In the 'Alchymist' he found a good libretto with features similar to 'Faust' and put the best of himself into the music, which anticipates Wagner in its harmony and handling of the voices, though perhaps not as fresh and powerful as 'Faust'. Deeply discouraged by the failure of the 'Alchymist' and the great success of French and Italian opera, he gave up writing for the stage for fourteen years (see note 4), but never abandoned hope that eventually German opera would become firmly established. So it is not surprising that he took such a warm interest in Wagner's early operas and Schumann's 'Genoveva'.

If we are to bring Spohr's name before the general public again, his operas along with the concertos must be given a hearing. The recent revivals of other neglected operas of the early 19th century give us hope that we can make progress here. It may be difficult to get a stage performance of 'Faust', but we could do something to make conductors and singers aware of what fine music it contains. The overture certainly should be far better known and we could press the B.B.C. to perform a concert version of all or part of the opera. This would help to sweep aside some of the more casual generalisations made about Spohr's music. In 'Faust' we can hear how near he came to becoming a really great composer.

NOTES: (1)--The overture to 'Alruna' is modelled on that of 'Zauberflöte'.

(2)--In Kassel between 1822 and 1848 'Faust' was performed 29 times; 'Jessonda' was performed 39 times.

(3)--For example the slow introduction to the 'Overture in the Serious Style' of 1843.

(4)--'The Crusaders' of 1844 shows further technical advance in the direction of German Music Drama, but inspite of some inspired passages has a confused plot and long stretches of rather weak music. There are some grandiose effects reminiscent of Spontini and Meyerbeer.