

THE INTRODUCTION OF 'THE LAST JUDGEMENT' AND
'AZOR AND ZEMIRA' TO ENGLAND IN 1830-1831

by Clive Brown

At the time of Spohr's visit to England in 1843 The Musical World observed that the performance of The Fall of Babylon under Spohr's baton at the Exeter Hall

must be regarded, to speak entirely without hyperbole, as a great national event...for it has called forth a demonstration of popular enthusiasm, such as had been rarely manifest upon any occasion, political or civil in this country (1).

and, summing up the whole visit, The Atlas concluded:

We think of Spohr, then, as of one already and surely canonized to immortality. We hail his presence as we should that of Haydn, or Mozart or Beethoven. (2).

It had been very different at the time of his first visit to England in 1820. Then he seems to have been unknown to all but a few English musicians; only one work appears to have been performed here prior to that date (the overture to Alruna having been given by the Professional Society on Feb. 5 1816). What little was known of Spohr in England was of his reputation as a violinist rather than as a composer. Indeed it was in the capacity of violinist that he made the greatest impression during that visit; his own account of the visit in his Autobiography tends to magnify the impact made by his music. Nevertheless while enthusiasm may not have been as widespread as his recollections imply, a spark of interest had been kindled which was kept alight among members of the Philharmonic Society. This was fed during the 1820s by reports of his increasing fame in Germany, especially after the success of Jessonda, which appeared in The Harmonicon and other journals, by the gradual spread of performances of his instrumental music, by English publications, particularly of arrangements from Faust and Jessonda, and by the direct contact of musicians who visited him in Germany, notably Sir George Smart, Edward Holmes and Edward Taylor.

By 1830, however, appreciation of Spohr's music in England was still confined to a very limited circle of musicians and it was the first English performances of The Last Judgement (Die Letzten Dinge) and Azor and Zemira (Zemire und Azor), that laid the foundations of his

(1) Musical World (xviii (1843), 253

(2) Quoted in MW (1843) 228

popularity, culminating in a widespread acceptance that notwithstanding Mendelssohn's he must be regarded as the greatest living composer.

Spohr had composed Die Letzten Dinge in 1825-26 to a text by Rochlitz and the first performance took place at Kassel in March 1826. In a letter to Speyer, Spohr wrote of its effect:

The effect was extraordinary, though I say it myself! Never before have I had such satisfaction from the first performance of one of my major works (3).

Its next performance at the Rhenish Musical Festival in Dusseldorf in May of the same year was received with such enthusiasm that the festival had to be prolonged so that it could be given for a second time.

News of its success travelled to England, where The Harmonicon carried a report of the first performance stating that the oratorio was:

Marked with all his talent, which is at once vigorous and creative, and abounds with a variety of subjects, which cannot fail to become popular (4).

This was followed shortly after by another article in praise of the (5) work. However, little more was heard of it for some time, though it was meanwhile being extensively circulated in Germany; but in 1829 Edward Holmes, who had undoubtedly heard of its success during his continental travels and had probably procured the German edition of the oratorio at that time, reviewed it at length in The Atlas. The review was not wholly uncritical, but the overall message was that the oratorio must be regarded as a work of great significance. Holmes was not entirely convinced that the music was always 'equal to the sublimity of the subject', but felt that 'some movements of it could be scarcely improved'. He concluded:

We doubt whether...any composer now living possesses the same knowledge of the secret affinities between matters of the external world and the invisible world of music or whether any can find utterance for human passion in music than Spohr. In this he is like Mozart. We again recommend this oratorio to the notice of the directors of musical festivals as a good subject well set, calculated to please every person of imagination and taste, and peculiarly adapted to gain fame in this country (6).

As in the case of Spohr's concert aria 'Tu m'abbandonai ingrato', performed for the first time by the Philharmonic Society in 1829, which Holmes had recommended in The Quarterly Musical Magazine in 1827 (7), his desire to have Die Letzten Dinge performed in England was soon gratified, for in the following year The Last Judgement (as it came to be called in England) was announced for the Norwich Festival of September 1830. The person directly behind the production of the oratorio at Norwich, however, was Edward Taylor, who had already formed a personal acquaintance with Spohr and had been actively promoting his music in London, where, according to Harmonicon, he was responsible for the introduction of the duet from Der Berggeist, 'O calma o bella' performed at the Philharmonic Society on March 29 1830 (8).

(3) W. Speyer, Wilhelm Speyer der Liedercomponist, (Munich, 1925) p.95

(4) The Harmonicon, v (1827), 55

(5) H, v (1827), 72

(6) The Atlas, iv (1829), 749

(7) The Quarterly Musical Magazine, ix (1827), 513

(8) H, viii (1830), 216

Despite the glowing reports from the continent which had appeared in The Harmonicon, and Edward Holmes's 'strenuous recommendations', there are indications that the initial reaction to the proposed performance of the work was less than enthusiastic. By 1830 little of Spohr's music had been performed outside London; the overtures played at the Yorkshire music meetings in 1825 and 1826 were exceptional and in any case do not seem to have been particularly well received.

A few quartets and piano arrangements may have been familiar to provincial amateurs, but what little was known of him as an instrumental and opera composer was clearly insufficient to inspire confidence in his abilities as a composer of oratorio. The music critic of The Spectator observed, in 1843, that in the 1820s Spohr's music had encountered the prejudice that a 'professed fiddler' could not be a fine composer and pointed that in 1830 The Last Judgement had come up against similar objections. He continued:

Here, again, Spohr had to encounter a former prejudice: "Spohr was a fine performer on the violin, and therefore incompetent to produce a fine oratorio. Who ever heard of Viotti, Jarnowick, De Beriot, Paganini composing an oratorio? Ne sutor" etc. Many were the misgivings, significant the shrugs, gloomy the forebodings, as to the result of this "bold and very hazardous experiment". The singers, principal and choral, were against it. It did not contain a single song, and the choruses were awfully difficult. There was no previous feeling or sympathy in its favour - no puff - no flourish of trumpets. It was left to tell its own tale, and to stand or fall by its own merits (9).

Cox also echoed these sentiments when he recorded that:

On the occasion of this oratorio being first performed, it was not given in its entirety, it having been doubted whether a provincial audience could bear the strain of novelty in that direction, especially as it was not presented with the impress of metropolitan recommendation (10).

It is difficult to conceive the enormously powerful impression which, in the event, The Last Judgement actually did make. Preceding the Victorian age by seven years, it can truly be said to have ushered in the age of Victorian oratorio. Only the allegiance to Handel's works had sustained the oratorio tradition in England, for, as Cox observed, the writing of oratorio 'had never been attempted with the smallest success by any composers, either foreign or English since the days of Handel. (11)' It must have seemed to many that in The Last Judgement there had at last appeared a work which was 'of undoubted genius, and even worthy of being placed side by side with any of Handel's compositions - the Messiah, Samson, and Israel in Egypt alone excepted. (12)' A few, such as the critic in The Harmonicon who noted that the chorus 'Destroyed is Babylon' 'moved every bosom by a sublimity of effect which none since Haydn wrote his Creation and Crotch his Palestine, has been able to produce, (13)', might have cited other successful oratorios produced since Handel's day. Even Haydn's Creation, however, did not have the same marked impact as The Last Judgement at

(9) The Spectator, xvi (1843), 636

(10) J.B.Cox, Musical Recollections, (London, 1872), i, 209

(11) ibid, i, 209

(12) ibid, i, 209

(13) H, ix (1831), 98

this period, probably because Haydn's style was found to be too light and naive to satisfy the highly serious approach to religion which characterised the middle years of the nineteenth century.

Later writers who did not personally experience the enthusiasm which Spohr's music created among the musicians of an earlier generation have tended to underestimate the oratorio's impact. The epithets which were much later applied to The Last Judgement and to Spohr's music in general - that it was sweet and sickly, lacking in dramatic power and so on - are in striking contrast to the feelings which, when new, the oratorio induced in its audiences. A.W.Patterson, who was better disposed towards the work than most of her contemporaries, wrote in 1902:

...we are bound to confess that it possesses much charming musicianship. But when we come to consider the awful grandeur - the tremendous nature - of the subject-matter treated, the lack of what one might name "Handelian power" is evident....the chorus "Destroyed is Babylon" is fuller of sweet pathos than a striking tone-picture of a terrible cataclysm (14).

It seems that, with their musical perceptions surfeited by what had come after, later generations could not recapture the feelings that had animated its first audiences. Macfarren, writing in his old age on the dramatic qualities of oratorios, could no longer experience directly the power which it had exerted fifty years earlier, but he nevertheless retained the memory of it, observing:

The Last Judgement is, save one scene, not dramatic, and it has succeeded, but this was when Spohr was new here and his peculiarities made an almost madness among musicians (15).

The full extent of its initial impact, however, is conveyed in the report of the first performance which appeared in The Harmonicon.

The Last Judgement...we consider as one of the greatest musical productions of the age. It would be presumptuous in us, having heard it but once, were we to attempt a minute detail of all the beauties of this elaborate work, in which is embodied every passion, sentiment and feeling, and, however elevated the name of Spohr may justly be as a composer of the highest class of instrumental music, this sublime oratorio will add immensely to his reputation and henceforth his name will be inserted in the list of those authors whose studies, efforts and genius have been most conspicuously successful in this the noblest branch of art (16).

And, quoting extracts from the chorus 'Destroyed is Babylon', the editor was lavish with his praises saying of one passage 'the following modulations...as beautiful as they are original, form a passage that will not easily be matched in the whole range of musical composition'. That the critic was far from alone in his opinion is confirmed by the account which appeared in The Spectator thirteen years later, which stated:

It was diligently prepared and carefully rehearsed: the day of performance came - and there was but one opinion. It bore down all opposition - subdued every prejudice; musicians of all schools - foreign, English, ancient, modern - all yielded their willing homage to the genius of its author: Vaughan and Knyvett, Braham, Stockhausen, were united and equal encomiasts. Perhaps the most

(14) A.W.Patterson, Oratorio, (London, 1902), 120

(15) H.L.Banister, George Alexander Macfarren, his life, works & influence, (London, 1891), 303

(16) H, viii (1830), 466

emphatic testimony to its power was given by Malibran, whom it completely subdued, and who was obliged, sobbing and almost hysterical, to quit the orchestra. "I thought " she said to the person who now records her words, "that I had been too practised a stager to make such a fool of myself before an audience; but I had yet to learn the full power of music upon the heart - I have now felt it all." (17)

Even H.F. Chorley, who was no lover of Spohr's music, was forced to confess with respect to The Last Judgement: 'We thought it impossible ever to be tired of the composer's peculiar and rich Harmonies, of his exquisitely symmetrical constructions' (18). Edward Taylor, in a more partisan spirit, wrote in 1836:

Perhaps there is no instance of a similar work, under like circumstances, having attained such speedy celebrity and such high estimation as the "Last Judgement". Before the performance of this Oratorio at the Norwich Festival in 1830, Spohr was little known in this country beyond the audience and orchestra of the Philharmonic Concerts, while as a sacred composer he was unknown. Yet, produced without the sanction of metropolitan approbation, new to every performer and every auditor, it at once seized the public attention, and commanded the admiration of the most distinguished professors of every school. Its influence on the feelings of an audience has been attested by expressions more decided and unequivocal than I ever remember to have witnessed. I speak not of the admiration which the musician derives from such a display of the power and the resources of his art, but of the homage which nature, though musically untutored, involuntarily yet willingly pays to genius. The throbbing heart, the moistened eye, the quivering lip, here bespeak the triumph of the Composer (19).

All these accounts show conclusively that, far from being the sugary, sentimental music, lacking in dramatic power, which later generations conceived it to be, The Last Judgement appeared to contemporaries as a work of towering genius and passionate intensity. It was a work besides which other contemporary oratorios seemed weak and ineffective. The Harmonicon remarked of Chevalier Neukomm's briefly admired Mount Sinai, performed at Gloucester in 1832 along with The Last Judgement:

Against the gigantic power of Spohr it was unable to stand and its effect was consequently feeble. It is no discredit to it to fall short of the standard of Haydn, Mozart, or Spohr (20).

Another testimony to its effect was given in a review in The Musical World of a Philharmonic concert in 1836 at which Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony had been performed. This commented:

The storm scene in the 'Pastoral Symphony' is perhaps the finest and most powerful specimen of musical description that ever was written. We recollect no parallel to it in sublimity, unless it be the concluding symphony to the grand chorus in Spohr's Last Judgement...and the first movement of his sinfonia caracteristique (i.e. Die Weihe der Töne) (21).

(17) S, xvi (1843), 636

(18) H.F. Chorley, Music & Manners, (London, 1841), 237

(19) Preface to Taylor's edition of The Crucifixion

(20) H, x (1832), 250

(21) The Musical World, i (1836), 141

Hogarth, too, testified to the real dramatic impact which Spohr's oratorios appeared to possess at the time of their introduction, saying in 1838:

The Last Judgement and The Crucifixion are not surpassed in the sublimity of many of their parts by anything that has appeared since the days of Handel. Though the music of these pieces never descends from the solemnity which belongs to their subjects, yet it possesses great variety of expression, passing from the most awful and terrible effects to strains of the deepest pathos and melancholy (22).

Enough examples of contemporary opinion have been cited to give a clear view of the oratorio's impact; more objective evidence can be provided by a list of performances it received during the years immediately following its introduction. In 1830 it was performed at Norwich and Liverpool; in 1831 at the Philharmonic Society (the only time an oratorio was ever given at these concerts) again in London at Vaughan's benefit, also at Dublin, Derby, Oxford and Manchester; in 1832 at Gloucester; in 1833 at Worcester and again at Liverpool; in 1834 at Hereford; in 1835 at Cambridge and York; in 1836 at the Royal Academy of Music and the Sacred Harmonic Society in London, at Mitcham and again at Manchester and Worcester. No doubt there were other less important performances which did not leave their mark in the national press.

The English version of the oratorio was brought out almost immediately by Novello in vocal score, and full band parts were certainly available by 1836. In England it made so deep an impression that Spohr's name was indissolubly linked with this, his most widely popular work. In 1843 he travelled through parts of the south of England and the Autobiography described the trip thus:

Though in accordance with the advice of the queen he had thought to make this little journey incognito, nevertheless his arrival soon became known in each town, and the composer of "Die Letzten Dinge", the pianoforte arrangement of which he found in almost every house, was received by everyone after his own manner, with the highest honours (23).

In the long run, the tremendous success of The Last Judgement was to make it almost synonymous with the name of its composer, but the immediate effect was to cause a flurry of public interest in Spohr and his works. It was almost certainly in consequence of this that it was decided to bring out a version of his opera Zemire und Azor at Covent Garden in April 1831, under the title Azor and Zemira, or the Magic Rose. The announcement of the production 'caused great excitement amongst the dilettante and professors of the metropolis,' (24) since this would be the first chance of hearing any of Spohr's operas staged in England.

The English version was not in fact a straightforward translation of the opera, but a free adaptation which even included some of the music of Faust.

As far as can be determined from contemporary reviews, Cox's recollection of a very high level of interest among serious musicians is thoroughly reliable. The interest aroused was certainly considerable enough to

(22) G. Hogarth, *Musical History*, (London, 1838), ii, 187

(23) *Autobiography*, ii, 253

(24) Cox, i, 210

justify the publication of a volume containing the complete music of the opera, and to cause The Harmonicon to publish a substantial number of extracts from it in its musical supplement for 1831. The Morning Chronicle, reviewing the first night, concluded:

G.PENSON gave out the Opera for Thursday and Saturday, without any expression of dissent, and with very warm applause. We saw in the House many musical professors of eminence, both native and foreign, all interested for the success of imported SPOHR (25).

The Times noted that 'the Opera was exceedingly well received by a very crowded audience', (26) while later during its run, The Atlas observed:

The musical professors so abundant here on the first night have sent their pupils and friends by dozens - the boxes are full, there is a good independent pit, and no want of encores: let, therefore, Spohr's compositions and Covent Garden flourish together (27).

Indeed, such was the success of the opera that The Harmonicon felt justified in stating that the event 'might be almost considered as a musical era in the history of that theatre' (28).

Nevertheless, Spohr's opera was not deemed to be beyond criticism. Edward Holmes took the opportunity to comment at length upon the strengths and weaknesses of Spohr's style in general in The Atlas; the inference that his music made its strongest appeal to the musically sophisticated listener may be clearly deduced from his judicious analysis. He wrote:

Spohr is indeed one of the most remarkable artists of the age; and if he possessed variety of style equal to the depth of his feeling and the grace and elegance of his melody, he would be another Mozart. Like that great master his temperament is also melancholy, and his dominant passion for music of a strongly expressive and mournful cast. So admirable is he in this style, that he not infrequently recalls the best manner of Mozart: but, as is the case with many who feel deeply sentiments of one class, and want sympathy with others...we expect to find that the fault of his operas is that the movements are imprinted with an identity of character, and a fondness for certain modulations and cadences, which in a long production will be found detrimental to effect... He has written much violin and chamber music, and employed in it the most refined melody, and the utmost ingenuity and thought, that human invention can devise; and in his dramatic music, there is scarcely a casual symphony which does not bear the marks of the same elaboration. In this respect he surpasses Mozart or Weber; but the effect of his pains is not to improve upon their models. If he were to score with less care, to lay on his colours more massively and broadly, he would oftener attain his end. His faults are the reverse of the modern school of Italy, and his abortions, if any passages can be called such, proceed from a stupefaction of ideas. To listen to his music requires all one's ears, and the excellencies and touches of the artist follow upon one another so thickly, that there is hardly leisure for the admiration which each demands (29).

Whatever quibbles might have been raised against the opera in point of detail, there is no doubt that it was materially successful. In 1853 The Musical World could still say that 'Azor and Zemira may still be

(25) The Morning Chronicle, 6:iv:1831

(26) The Times, 6:iv:1831

(27) A, vi (1831), 296

(28) H, ix (1831), 129

(29) A, vi (1831), 242

remembered as one of the most lucrative musical pieces ever brought out at Covent Garden when Covent Garden was an English Theatre' (30). Also, by introducing Spohr to the opera house as well as to the concert hall and the church, it widened still further the extent of public knowledge of his standing in the musical world. The daily papers in reviewing the opera took the opportunity to enlighten their readers with such snippets of information as 'Spohr is at present considered the first living composer in Germany' (31), which they had not previously had occasion to do, since it was not their practice to review Philharmonic concerts in the 1820s. The Morning Chronicle dilated upon the same theme, giving evidence of the dichotomy between the major part of the musical public, whose predilections were for light and undemanding music, and the smaller but influential portion who were the arbiters of cultivated taste. There is perhaps a hint in the following passage that the critic was not wholeheartedly in support of the musical Germanophiles:

Sir GEORGE SMART.. has laid the town under no little obligation to him for making it better acquainted with the excellencies of one of the greatest and most original composers of modern times. To call him great and original in these days, is almost, in other words, to say that SPOHR is German. We do not pretend to say that the music of SPOHR is calculated to be as popular in this country as that of ROSSINI, from the very circumstance that it has greater depth and power of genius; but the German has not the gaitly and brilliancy of the Italian, which captivates at once, and requires little trouble to be understood (32).

A little later in the same review he returned to a similar point remarking:

.. what are called "airs" in the printed book of songs, sometimes want melody, and are a little overlaid by the orchestral accompaniments. The concerted pieces are learnedly worked up, and some of them are very agreeable; but on the whole there was a want of variety.

It seems clear that he was not alone in his opinion, for the following week Holmes felt constrained to come forward with 'A Defence of Spohr' in The Atlas, couched in heavily sarcastic vein, writing:

A charge of want of melody has been brought against Spohr, the author of Azor and Zemira; about as justly as if we should say of the Rev. Mr. Irving that he wanted words, or of one like the memorable Daniel Lambert that he wanted fat. Melody in the sense of the objectors means something like "Meet me by Moonlight" or "Come where the Aspens quiver" and embraces all such successions of harmonious sounds as may be ground by a street organ, and brought home to the ear without difficulty... They listen to Spohr in the buckles and ruffles of their grandfathers. It is hard upon the cause of good music that a fine work should suffer from the pique or spleen of writers who do not understand it. The composer affronts them by his invention and contrivance; a new harmony is like a knock in the face; the modulation becomes puzzling - the critic confused and resentful, and so makes up his mind to say, "this man has no melody." It is sufficient that the opinion

(30) MW, xxviii (1853), 510

(31) T, 6:iv:1831

(32) MC, 6:iv:1831

will be deemed well-founded by the common rout of hearers - the numbers on the side of the writer will secure him from the ill effects of the laughter of the better sort... The article we gave last week upon the Azor and Zemira, we now feel convinced did not do justice to the excellencies of the music but (in the usual spirit of criticism) dwelt too much upon the defects of the author, showing at the same time, our own sagacity in detecting them (33).

The divergences which are apparent in these extracts formed much of the basis for discussion in the press during the 1830s and Spohr was to come in for a great deal of fierce criticism, but with the difference that whereas before 1830 interest was confined to a relatively small number of musicians and connoisseurs and was centred on his instrumental compositions, after the success of The Last Judgement and Azor and Zemira his music was much more widely known and his reputation as an all-round composer of the first rank firmly established. Indeed, it could even be said that, with reference to the opera, 'Those...who were best qualified to pronounce upon the quality of the work, were decidedly of the opinion that "Spohr had shown his strength more in vocal than in instrumental music" ' (34). Though the public as a whole may have preferred the music of Rossini and other composers whose work did not appear to make such strenuous demands on the intellect, they had now perforce to recognise the pre-eminence of Spohr as a great and profound composer, even when they may not have cared for his music. But there is reason to believe that the growing self-consciousness and moral earnestness, which were increasingly a characteristic feature of the age, were conducive to an appreciation of the very features in Spohr's music which matched those qualities.

(33) A. vi (1831), 296

(34) Cox, i, 211