

A NINETEENTH CENTURY SPOHR CURIOSITY FROM LEEDS

by Philip Scowcroft

I have recently read Dr. William Spark's 'Musical Reminiscences' (1892), included in which is a selection of programmes of organ recitals given by the author in the Town Hall, Leeds. Many of these featured a single composer: Bach, Handel, Haydn, Gluck, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Weber, the Wesleys, Michael Costa, Rossini, Bellini, Lefebure Wely, Gounod - and Spohr. A copy of the Spohr programme is extant and its scope - an overture, a symphony movement, opera and oratorio selections - illustrates not only the composer's popularity in this country a century ago but the wide repertoire of the organists of those days when orchestral concerts were infrequent and the radio and gramophone not yet thought of. Indeed, of the 'one composer' recitals referred to above only those devoted to Bach, Mendelssohn, the Wesleys and Wely included any music originally written for organ solo.

Spark's programme annotations, including his personal recollections

of Spohr, may be of interest to us even today; he himself (b. 1823, d. 1897) first went to Leeds with S.S. Wesley in 1842 and was later (1850) appointed Organist of St. George's in that city. He founded the Leeds Madrigal and Motet Society and the People's Concerts, becoming Borough Organist in 1859. He lectured on music throughout Yorkshire, including my home town of Doncaster, illuminating such subjects as "The Vocal Music of the Victorian Era", "Glees and Partsongs" and "The Minstrelsy of Old England", these being titles of lectures he gave in Doncaster (with live illustrations) during the 1870s. He also composed cantatas, anthems, services, glees and an oratorio, 'Immanuel', performed in 1887 at the Leeds Festival, of which his younger brother Frederick was Honorary Secretary 1877-1907.

Spark said of Spohr: "I well remember being introduced to this great composer at the last Purcell commemoration day in Westminster Abbey, when he was accompanied by his wife (a most accomplished musician) and his nephew, Adolphe Hesse, the distinguished organist. Each had been listening most attentively to the fine compositions of our own Henry Purcell, and I noted how interested Spohr seemed to be in attending to the prolongation of the final notes of the choir in that vast vaulted building, whose lofty aisles seem to embrace the sounds as anxious to retain them.

Spark was evidently fond of the oratorio 'The Last Judgement' - "His famous work, 'The Last Judgement', was first made known in England at the Norwich Musical Festival of 1830. Its rich, original, luscious harmonies quite fascinated our native musicians, who in many instances endeavoured to imitate Spohr's original manner, so that the term "Spohr-ish" soon became associated with many of the compositions which were produced at that and subsequent periods by English writers."

The programme given by Dr. William Spark consisted of:-

1. OVERTURE to the Opera "Jessonda" SPOHR

"The overture is one of the most original and beautiful of all orchestral preludes, and has ever been a favourite with musicians, especially our first-class organists, who have, like the late Dr. Wesley and Mr. W.T. Best, often made a special feature of it in their programmes. The opening Adagio in E flat minor, with its striking bass and sustained passages for the wind instruments, seems to be particularly impressive and effective on the organ; the brilliant Allegro, in the major key, is full of piquant melody, and rich, full harmonies."

2. ADAGIO in A flat, from the Notturmo, for wind instruments, Op. 34 SPOHR

"Compositions for wind instruments only were scarcely known before the time of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, each of whom contributed not a few charming works to this class of music."

3. SELECTION from the Oratorio "THE LAST JUDGEMENT" SPOHR

4. SOPRANO SOLO and Chorus, "Though all thy friends forsake thee": from the Oratorio, "Calvary" SPOHR

"This beautiful movement has been adapted to the words "As pants the hart for cooling stream," and has become popular as an anthem."

5. ANDANTINO, "CRADLE SONG," from the Grand Symphony, "The Power of Sound" SPOHR

"One of the most singular, and yet beautiful instrumental movements extant; the peculiar rhythm, often different in one hand from that in the other; the graceful melody; and rich, varied harmonies, are all equally to be admired and enjoyed."

6. SELECTION from the Opera "Jessonda" SPOHR

"Including the chorus, "Kalt und starr" (cold and stiff); the aria, "Bald bin ich ein Geist geworden" (Soon shall I become a Spirit); and the finale, "Wilde, ungeheure Schmerzen" (Strong, unmerited pains)."