

THE PERFORMANCE OF SPOHR'S MUSIC IN PROVINCIAL ENGLAND:
DONCASTER'S EXPERIENCE

by Philip Scowcroft

Some years ago the Journal (1) included an article on Spohr and the Norwich Festivals and it would also be possible to list performances of Spohr's choral and other music from 1830 onwards at other 19th Century English festivals like Liverpool, Manchester, Derby, York, Newcastle and Cambridge (2). It may also be of some interest to assess the performance in this respect of Doncaster, a relatively small provincial town with no particular musical pretensions.

The first reference I have found to Spohr in the Doncaster Gazette is in 1834, to a performance of The Last Judgement at the Hull Festival on 26 September in that year. It was, however, to be many years before any Spohr was actually heard in Doncaster, possibly because for the Victorians he was reckoned a choral composer and the town had no effective permanent choral society (though many concerts of other types of music did take place) until the foundation of a Harmonic Society during 1847. On 3 April 1850 this Society did include excerpts from the obviously very popular The Last Judgement in a "Grand Miscellaneous Selection of Sacred Music". This however was an isolated instance and no more Spohr was heard in Doncaster for three decades, even though violinists and harpists visited in profusion and some kind of choral society remained active. As Pants the Hart, Blessing, Glofy, Power and Honour and Blest are the Departed were quite popular anthems at the Parish Church and Christ Church in the eighties and nineties (3); the first piece of secular music to be heard in the town was the fairly well-known air, Rose Softly Blooming from the opera Zemira and Azor, whose performance by one Mary Davies at a Corn Exchange ballad concert (four solo singers, a cellist and a pianist were the participants) on 18 November 1884 was "marked by much pathos" (4). No performance of any violin music by Spohr seems to have taken place locally before 7 October 1888 when a Barcarole (sic) was played in the unlikely surroundings of Oxford Place Methodist Church's Harvest Festival, the violinist being Harry McKenzie, Organist at the Church and Headmaster of the Church's School.

This handful of performances completed the town's knowledge of Spohr in performance during the 19th Century. Yet better was to come, and surprisingly at a time when the composer's popularity generally in England was beginning to fade. His anthems remained popular, especially with Nonconformist churches - How Lovely are Thy Dwellings appeared in a recital at Hall Gate Congregational Church in May 1906, the singing being "full of vigour, intelligence and tone" (5). The following year saw the town's first complete performance of The Last Judgement at the Parish Church on 5 December, conducted by the then Organist, popular songwriter Wilfrid Sanderson, who had at his disposal a choir and orchestra of 70, with Mr. Maidment of Rotherham Parish Church

officiating at the organ. The church was crowded, choral singing was good on the whole, with all the solos taken by choristers or choirmen, the orchestra thoroughly efficient. G.H.Adams, Organist of St.Jude's church (in Hexthorpe, an "inner suburb") programmed two Spohr cantatas between the wars: God Thou art Great on 18 November 1922 and the ever-durable The Last Judgement on 6 December 1925. For the latter two church choirs combined, the performance being described by the Doncaster Chronicle as "unequal". The opening chorus was excellently sung, the others less well. Some of the singing was apparently inexpressive with not enough light and shade. Though the quartets were rather weak, solos on the whole were well executed, especially the bass air, Thus Saith the Lord. Obviously, reading between the lines, a somewhat domestic effort.

Thereafter Spohr seems to have sunk without trace for several further decades. His instrumental music has enjoyed something of a revival during the past ten years, due in considerable measure to the distinguished clarinettist John Denman, who gave the English premiere (though with piano only) of the brilliant Potpourri on Themes of Karl von Winter, Opus 80 at the Museum in 1972. Other works performed by him at the same venue included the Variations, Opus 34 and the Fantasy on a Theme by Danzi, Opus 81 (with the London String Quartet in 1976). Further Spohr pieces heard at the Museum in recent years have included the Six German Songs, a rare Adagio, for bassoon, a movement from the 2nd Clarinet Concerto, but only with piano accompaniment, as a short example in a lecture devoted to clarinet virtuosi of the past, and, most importantly, on 30 June 1979, the mature Septet, Opus 147, an enterprise owing much to Chris Tutt's determination. Earlier that year (28 February) the Doncaster Metropolitan Institute of Higher Education had enterprisingly programmed the 1st Clarinet Concerto (complete) at their High Melton premises, with advanced student Gary Winder a most accomplished soloist - the first Spohr orchestral work to be heard in the area, just 120 years after the composer's death.

Summing up, the "Spohr era" in England largely passed Doncaster by (and, one suspects, many other small provincial towns) but occasionally during the present century his music has been afforded modest revival, usually due to the efforts of an isolated enthusiast like Sanderson, Adams or Denman.

- (1) Spohr Journal 5 (1976) p.9.
- (2) See R.M.A. Research Chronicles Nos.5-8. The works favoured in the 1830s were usually The Last Judgement, The Christian's Prayer and an (unspecified) Violin Concerto, probably the 8th.
- (3) As Pants the Hart was the morning anthem for the twentieth, and last, Festival of the Doncaster Choral Union, 258 voices from church choirs all over South Yorkshire (19 June 1884). The diaries of Parish Church Organist Robert Rogers (in Doncaster Borough Archives) provide an almost complete record of service music at the Church for the years they cover (broadly 1886-1901).
- (4) Doncaster Gazette.
- (5) Ibid.