

'A VISIT TO SPOHR AT CASSEL' - STERNDALE BENNETT'S IMPRESSIONS

by Michael Hopf

Early in 1842, the young English composer, William Sterndale Bennett, set off on an artistic expedition to Germany. One of the prime objects of this journey was to meet the great Spohr at Cassel. As early as 1837, there is evidence that Spohr had heard and taken an interest in Bennett's piano pieces. Even Schumann, Bennett's friend and mentor, had noticed the influence of Spohr on Bennett's overture "The Wood Nymphs". Hardly surprising, therefore, that the Englishman should wish to pay his respects in person to the "doyen" of German composers.

Bennett's description of his visit is contained in his journals and personal letters to Mary Wood, later to become his wife. These provide a fascinating picture of musical life in Cassel and, not least, of Spohr himself.

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Bennett arrived at Hesse-Cassel on 5 January, 1842, after six days of strenuous travel.

(Journal) 'Römischer Kaiser, Hesse-Cassel, 3 o'clock Mittwoch, Jan. 5, 1842. - - - On my arrival here (at 9 a.m.), immediately sent my cards to Spohr, Hauptmann, Madame de Malzburg, and Frank Mori. - - - I received messages from all. - - - Since dinner have paid my visit to Spohr, who has always been represented to me as a cold, haughty person, but whom, I am proud to say, I found quite the reverse. He has a very pretty little house all to himself, in a little garden, and as soon as I entered I heard the violin going, but found that it was a pupil playing; he received me very kindly; talked with him about his new Symphony which we are to have at Philharmonic this next season, and other matters. - - - Tomorrow I shall hear under his direction "The Templar and the Jewess" of Marschner, though, as he told me, he wished me to hear "Fidelio" which he was to have given, but in consequence of the illness of one of the singers (was) postponed; he received the message to this effect whilst I was with him, and the coolness with which these Germans take these matters perfectly astonishes an Englishman, at least it does me. Now I only want to see Cherubini, and I shall know the only three great men left in our Art, viz. Spohr, Mendelssohn and Cherubini. - - - Wednesday night, 11 O'clock. Have been to the concert given by Frank Mori this evening, and met Spohr there, who introduced me to his wife with whom and himself I sat the whole evening. - - -

Talked a great deal with Spohr about musical matters, about his Symphony in D minor (which I like better than anything of his) and which he told me he wrote twenty years ago in London. - - -

Jan. 7th. - - - Went last evening to the theatre, which is a very nice building but like all German theatres very badly lighted. - - - I was in the stalls behind the Orchestra, and between the acts Spohr came and talked to me about the Music and situations of the performers in the Orchestra. The Stringed instruments are all on the one side and the Wind instruments on the other; the Basses in the centre. I only wish our Wind instruments in England would play as well in tune as they do here. The singing was not good. I wonder our English singers do not learn German and travel, I am sure they would have great success.'

On January 8, he wrote to Miss Wood:- 'There is here a Madame de Malzburg, one of the aristocracy of Hesse-Cassel, who is a great friend of mine, and plays my Sketches by memory and other things, - - - and last evening I made my first appearance in Cassel at a large party in her house. Spohr was there and got up one of his double Quartetts for me to hear, he also played one of his single Quartetts. I never heard such playing in my life. He is now nearly sixty years old, but has the greatest energy. I promised him in the morning that I would play and I found the parts of my Caprice in my portmanteau, so I took that and trusted to my memory for the Pianoforte part. You would have pitied me if you had seen the curious Pianoforte I had to play on, and had not touched one since I left London. However I knew it was no time to make apologies, and off I started with everybody round the instrument. Something made me very determined, and I got through with capital success. They would not let me get up from the Pianoforte, and I must now play, "Der See, Der Mühlbach, und die Quelle," which is in English, "The Lake, The Millstream and the Fountain." The young ladies play these little sketches here, and so Spohr said to me, "They all play them differently, and now you must settle the point;" and then after I had played them, there was a great uproar. After supper, once more the ladies begged Spohr to ask me to play again, I played them my "Allegro Grazioso" and one of Mrs. Anderson's pieces (1). - - - Altogether it was perhaps the most gratifying time I ever spent in my life, and I only looked round the room for my Mary Wood to make my happiness complete.'

'Jan. 9th (letter continued) - - - I have been received here by the musical people like a Prince; when I go to the theatre Spohr leans over the Orchestra and talks to me as if I were his son. He paid me yesterday his visit at my Hotel but I was unfortunately not at home; he sent me, however, a note, inviting me to tea at his house and afterwards he took me to a Society, or kind of Club, of which he is a member, where I found many people smoking pipes and playing cards (in the German fashion). I was obliged also (only imagine) to play three games of billiards

1) Mrs. Anderson had accepted the dedication of his 'Suite de Pieces', a work recently written.

with him, and had the pleasure of being very wellbeaten by him, although I managed to win one game. I afterwards supped with him at the same place as his guest, and he brought me home again, and in all respects he has behaved to me as if I were really his son. He talks to me about music as if I knew as much about it as he did. - - - Tonight I think I shall go and spend the evening at Madame de Malzburg's. - - - Yesterday I found on her pianoforte my three diversions which she played with me uncommonly well. There was also a volume on the pianoforte with Bennett on the back. All these things make me very vain, and I must get back to England to bring me to myself again.'

(Journal.) 'Jan. 10th Paid my Abschieds-Visit to Spohr this morning and stayed nearly an hour with him. He has behaved all the time I have been here with the greatest kindness, and I won't forget it hastily. - - - Afterwards went to my favourite Madame de Malzburg, whom I like very much indeed and I never met a more amiable lady in my life. They want me to come back this way and I will if I can. Mr.K. supped with me this evening and talked about Theory and Counterpoint enough to serve half-a-dozen Academies. I must forget to mention that the Austrian Ambassador sent me a most polite message to spend the evening at his house, but I declined as I had to send my luggage to the Post-office and had no coat to go in. - - - I am now going to bed, and start tomorrow morning at half-past five. I cannot however close this book without a most grateful feeling for the great kindness I have experienced during the few days I have been in Cassel, and I shall always retain the most pleasant recollections of my visit.'

God save Spohr, Mdme de Malzburg, & & &.'

Bennett left Cassel on 11 January for Leipzig to meet again with Schumann.

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This account is reproduced from "The Life of Sterndale Bennett" by his son, S.R.Sterndale Bennett.

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