

SPOHR AND MENDELSSOHN

by Chris Tutt

IN 2009 the musical world will celebrate the bicentenary of Mendelssohn's birth on February 3rd and there is certain to be a great deal of attention given to it. There has been a significant growth of interest in his music in the last sixty years so in 2009 we can expect even more performances of his music and assessments of his standing as a composer. The year will also be the 150th anniversary of Spohr's death on October 22nd, 1859. There has been a similar revival of interest in his works, though not on the same scale as with Mendelssohn.

Previous Spohr anniversaries in 1959 and 1984 brought performances of long neglected works and this helped to encourage the recording of his music so that we are now in a position where a large portion of his output is available on CD.

There are a number of reasons why these two composers should be considered together and why, particularly in 2009, works of both should be programmed together. They were major figures on the European music scene in the 1830s and 1840s and each of them received many awards from monarchs, learned bodies and universities. Spohr was 25 years older than Mendelssohn but outlived him.

It is worth considering the state of music in Germany and Austria in 1830. Weber had died in 1826, Beethoven in 1827 and Schubert in 1828. Many at the time would have regarded Spohr as the greatest living composer in Germany. He had made a significant contribution to the development of German opera with *Faust* (1813), *Zemire und Azor* (1818) and *Jessonda* (1823). His oratorio *Die letzten Dinge*, known in Britain as *The Last Judgment* (1826), had also been a great success and his chamber music was widely performed.

His only rivals at the time were Mendelssohn, who had already produced during his teenage years such masterpieces as the Octet, the Quartet in A minor, Op.13, and the overture *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Marschner who was mainly known for his operas, particularly *Der Vampyr* and *Der Templar und die Jüdin*.

Over the following two decades Spohr wrote a number of works that were very well received such as the Third and Fourth Double Quartets, the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, the Quartet-Concerto and the Sextet but there were commentators who thought that in general he was running out of ideas.

In the meantime Mendelssohn's reputation grew, particularly with such works as *Elijah*, the Violin Concerto and the Quartet in F minor, Op.80, from the years just before his untimely death. By the 1840s Schumann was also making a reputation for himself and, though some thought his style difficult, others were already hailing him as the new great standard-bearer for German music. Wagner too was a controversial newcomer to the music scene and there were mixed reactions to *Rienzi*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*.

From the 1860s both Spohr and Mendelssohn suffered a slow decline in popularity, more marked in the case of Spohr. By the early 20th century many of their works were rarely, if ever, performed. Mendelssohn was still popular with many music lovers, thanks to works such as *Elijah*, the Violin Concerto, the *Scottish* and *Italian* Symphonies, some of the overtures, the Octet and certain other chamber works.

Spohr was known for some of his choral works in British churches and chapels and in Germany *Jessonda* was still given in some provincial opera houses. Other works still being performed were the Eighth and Ninth Violin Concertos, the Nonet, the Third Double Quartet and

the overtures to *Faust* and *Jessonda*.

For both composers the lowest point came in the 1930s and 1940s. They fell foul of the musical snobbery of many critics of the early 20th century and especially suffered from the cultural policy of the Nazis in Germany where Mendelssohn was attacked as a Jew and his music banned. In Britain they were caught up in the reaction against all things Victorian. Keith Warsop, in his article "Spohr and the Nazis" (*Spohr Journal* 31 of 2004), shows that Spohr's liberal views and friendship with Jewish musicians of his time meant that the playing of his music in Germany and the occupied countries was very much discouraged if not banned outright.

We have been given many good examples of contemporary and later assessments of both composers in books written by Clive Brown (*Louis Spohr: A Critical Biography*; Cambridge, 1984, and *A Portrait of Mendelssohn*; Yale, 2003). For an appreciation of Mendelssohn written just after his death Prof. Brown quotes from a long tribute by Sir George Macfarren. Here is a short extract:

It was, perhaps, not in his lifetime, not until now, that we can review the whole of his works collectively, regarding them rather as one chain of ideas that develops the progress and the entirety of his genius than as so many compositions, that the world is capable of assigning to Mendelssohn his true rank as a musician; but now that we have before us a complete panorama of his mind in the whole of its productions, we are justified in the impression so long entertained, that his grade is with the highest, and that we own in him the true associate of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. His claims to this eminence lie in the purely classical character of all his writings, by which is to be understood not merely cold correctness, but irresistible beauty in the highest style of musical expression; and in the striking originality that so obviously manifests itself in all his works as to give them an individuality which, it is not too much to say, is not to be found in the music of any of the great composers with whose names his is here classed, and which, devoid of mannerism, can hardly be attributed to the collected works of any other musician.

In 1848 a review in the *Morning Chronicle* of a performance of Spohr's Eighth Symphony began:

Now that Mendelssohn is dead, Spohr holds the position of the first composer of the day, without a possible rival. No master has done more to advance the art in the highest department of composition than he, and as he has excelled and produced masterpieces in every style, his genius may be pronounced universal, and a place be assigned to him by the side of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and the lamented musician just mentioned, who may appropriately be called kings of the art.

To get some idea of the received opinions nearly a century later, the entries in the *Oxford Companion to Music*, first published in 1938, are typical. The comments are almost certainly by Percy Scholes, the original editor:

MENDELSSOHN

He, Schumann and Chopin make up the trinity of early nineteenth-century romanticism of the less expansive and non-theatrical type. His music is charmingly written but never very deep, sometimes extremely beautiful and occasionally facile and commonplace.

SPOHR

His life was that of a travelling virtuoso violinist and, also, of an opera conductor, in both capacities of high rank; and, in his time, successful composer of the early nineteenth-century Romantic school. There is a manneristic chromaticism in his compositions which has been a factor in their decline in popularity.

Spohr and Mendelssohn had a very high regard for each other's achievements as composers. During his time as Director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra Mendelssohn regularly included works of Spohr in the programmes, including the Eleventh Violin Concerto, the Third and Fourth Symphonies and the Quartet-Concerto, indeed the Third Symphony appeared in the last concert Mendelssohn directed there before his death. Spohr also featured in the concerts of chamber music that Mendelssohn arranged in Leipzig. In a letter to Charlotte Moscheles in 1841 he wrote:

The only thing I regret in your charming letter is that you should have countenanced the strange attempts at making comparisons between Spohr and myself, or the petty cockfights in which, for some inconceivable reason and much to my regret, we have been pitted against each other in England. I never had the slightest idea of such competition or rivalry. You may laugh at me, or possibly be vexed, at my taking up such a silly matter so seriously. But there is something serious at the bottom of it; this pretended antagonism, imagined and started by heavens knows whom, can in no way serve either of us, but must rather be detrimental to both. Besides, I could never appear as the opponent of a master of Spohr's standing, whose greatness is so firmly established; for even as a boy, I had the greatest esteem for him in every respect, and with my riper years this has in no way been weakened.

The esteem mentioned by Mendelssohn in the above letter is shown when he wrote to Spohr in 1838 requesting a copy of the latter's latest symphony, No.5 in C minor, as it was planned to perform it at a Leipzig Gewandhaus concert. Mendelssohn went on to express his delight at one of Spohr's songs. He said:

I must thank you many times and with all my heart for the beautiful song in F sharp with clarinet accompaniment, the "Zwiegesang", which pleases me exceedingly and has so completely charmed me with its prettiness that I both sing and play it every day. It is not on account of any one particular feature that I admire it, but for its perfectly natural sweetness as a whole and which from beginning to end flows so lightly and gratefully to the feelings. How often have I sung it with my sisters and each time with renewed pleasure! And for that I must now thank you.

Spohr in his later years conducted performances of many of Mendelssohn's works. When they met, they enjoyed making music together. There are a number of passages in Spohr's *Autobiography* which illustrate his high regard and affection for Mendelssohn. For 1837, he wrote concerning the oratorio *St. Paul*:

We had industriously practised Mendelssohn's oratorio, and became more and more delighted with it. I proposed to give it on Whit Sunday at the concert which had been permitted for the benefit of the relief fund; but this was refused by the Prince, so that we were obliged to content ourselves with gratifying the lovers of music with two private performances of the oratorio upon the pianoforte at the Society of St. Cecilia.

In his last year as he grew weaker, the *Autobiography* (in the final part completed by members of his family) relates:

At frequent intervals he would request his wife to play something to him, and herein he would show a preference for the pianoforte music of Bach and Mendelssohn, yet without withdrawing his interest from the productions of more modern composers.

It is worth mentioning that Spohr shared Mendelssohn's great interest in the music of J.S.Bach and played his part in restoring more of it to the repertoire. In 1833 he was able to mount a public performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* in Kassel after several years of study and private rehearsals. This was repeated in later years and other vocal works of Bach were also performed.

Spohr dedicated his only Piano Sonata (Op.125 in A flat) to Mendelssohn who in turn dedicated his Piano Trio No.2 in C minor, Op.66, to Spohr.

When we consider which of Spohr's works would be worth coupling with those of Mendelssohn for concerts in 2009, an obvious example is that two string quartets could give a programme with Mendelssohn's Octet and one or two of Spohr's Double Quartets.

The Octet is one of the best known and admired of Mendelssohn's chamber works and the question arises as to what other pieces the players should offer. It has an almost orchestral sweep and power, but also many subtleties of feeling and texture. The Spohr Double Quartets on the other hand keep far more to chamber music proportions and would not be heard to best effect in a larger venue.

Of the four, No.1 in D minor, Op.65 (1823), has been the most performed in modern times with several recordings on CD including one by an ensemble led by Jascha Heifetz (RCA Victor GD87870). It is the most vigorous of the four but the second quartet has a mainly supporting role, though its present-day popularity has probably come about because for many years it was the only one easily available in a modern edition.

In the other three Double Quartets the two quartets move towards a full equality of status, reached fully in No.4 in G minor, Op.136 (1847). All four are among the best of Spohr's chamber works and No.3 in E minor, Op.87 (1833), was championed among others by Joachim in the second half of the 19th century.

There are a number of other works by Spohr which would be worthy companions of Mendelssohn's in concerts. He wrote 36 string quartets and, while some of them are disappointing, at least half of them could offer a great deal to modern players and listeners alike. An earlier quartet I would particularly recommend is the C major, Op.29/2, written in 1815 not long after the Nonet. It has many original features and a wonderful lyrical flow, ending with a vigorous finale. The style and string texture are quite different from Beethoven's, yet are almost as much a guide to future trends.

Contemporary with Mendelssohn's own quartet output and having much to offer are the works in B flat, Op.74/2 (1826), G major, Op.82/2 (1828), D minor, Op.84/1 (1831), B minor, Op.84/3 (1832) and C major, Op.141 (1849), together with string quintets (two violas) in B minor, Op.69 (1826) and A minor, Op.91 (1834). Mendelssohn's two string quintets (also two violas) could easily be programmed with one of these Spohr quintets to make an attractive recital.

Mendelssohn's two piano trios could be joined by one of those written by Spohr in the 1840s such as No.2 in F major, Op.123. The contrast in textures would be fascinating. Spohr, as a violinist, approached the medium with a different perspective from composers most at home on the piano.

In a series exploring Spohr's contribution to chamber music one should remember his wonderful duos for two violins which are superb in their mastery of the medium. One that has been played and recorded by a number of great players is Op.67/2 in D major (1824). In the right sort of setting for chamber music, two violinists with the technique and musicianship to meet its challenges could give great delight with it to a discerning audience.

Both of our composers made a valuable contribution to the German Lied, even if they did not achieve quite the range and depth of Schubert or Schumann. From Spohr's output the sets of six songs Op.37, Op.41 and Op.72 for soprano (or tenor) and Op.94 for baritone deserve to be better known as well as the comparatively familiar Op.103 for soprano, clarinet and piano.

Choirs have many works from both composers that are worth exploring. Two oratorios that were written at much the same time, Mendelssohn's *St. Paul* and Spohr's *Calvary* offer a valuable comparison of the similarities and differences of the two in their approach to choral music, in

particular how they tried to reconcile the legacy of earlier centuries with the latest techniques.

From *Calvary*, the second part in particular, shows a wide range of techniques and character. It does have some notable examples of Spohr's harmony at its sweetest but also passages of considerable harshness. There are chorale-like numbers that evoke the spirit of Bach and long, through-composed dramatic scenes. There is a beautiful, quiet dignity in the final chorus and one can well believe that, when Spohr conducted the work in Norwich in 1839 it was received (in the words of a contemporary report):

We looked around us – as not a breath was to be heard, deep silence everywhere – all were impressed with feelings more powerful than they could express.

There are a number of shorter choral works that could be brought together in the same programme. A cantata for soloists, chorus and orchestra that would be worth reviving is *Vater Unser*, known in the English version as *The Christian's Prayer*. There have been performances of it in Germany in recent decades but so far it has not appeared on CD.

Perhaps solo violinists who have Mendelssohn's concerto in their repertoire will also tackle in 2009 one or two of Spohr's such as the Seventh in E minor, Op.38, or the Eleventh in G major, Op.70. They could even study the concerto written at about the same time as the Mendelssohn and in the same key, the Fifteenth in E minor, Op.128, which also does away with the long orchestral introduction and links the three movements, a lovely, mellow work!

Those putting on orchestral concerts should be encouraged to consider Spohr's symphonies and overtures. If a whole symphony is too much of a gamble for audiences, then the overtures to *Faust*, *Jessonda* or *Der Alchymist* could easily be fitted into a programme and make their impact.

More and more clarinetists are now taking up Spohr's four concertos for the instrument and several versions of each are now available on CD. Now they have to be encouraged to play these marvellous concertos in public concerts and not just in the recording studios.

Finally, Mendelssohn and Spohr were patriotic Germans, intensely proud of their country and its culture but they combined this with a wide appreciation of other countries and their people. They enjoyed travelling around Europe and both developed strong ties with Britain. They were far from sharing the exclusive, self-centred nationalism which was already starting to grow in Germany.

Spohr witnessed and shared the high hopes in 1848 of a Germany united in freedom with constitutional government and lamented the disappointing outcome. Neither Spohr nor Mendelssohn lived to see the union brought about by violence in the wars of 1866 and 1870. Their adherence to the ideals of the Enlightenment stood as a reproach to extremists of any type.

Literature

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