

COMPOSER OF THE WEEK: LOUIS SPOHR 1784-1859

Script for Radio New Zealand (Concert FM) by **David Nalden**
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On Sunday July 2 1843 a concert of chamber music was held in the rooms of the Queen Square Select Society in London. The performance started at 2 o'clock; at five, a meal was served; and proceedings resumed again at seven.

But the event was remarkable not so much for its length (some five hours) as for its content. For the entire programme was devoted to the music of a single composer: Louis Spohr. It was described as a "Festival in Honour of the Arrival of Spohr in London"; and the following day Spohr received a letter from its organiser, who wrote "May you enjoy all the happiness that can result from the knowledge that you are a benefactor to the world and communicate happiness to others in a circle still increasing and never ending".

During his lifetime the fame and popularity of our Composer of the Week knew no bounds: his reputation had spread throughout Europe and far beyond. Indeed in 1844 he was invited to preside over the New York Music festival, being considered by the organisers as "the first of all living composers and directors of music". Many of his contemporaries held Spohr to be a composer greater than Beethoven: the music publisher Novello placed his name alongside those of Bach, Handel, Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven around the decorative borders on the covers of their scores.

But Time and History have not upheld the verdict of Spohr's own century. The third edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* devoted 14 columns to Spohr under his own name, and four under the heading *Symphony*. In the fifth edition of 1954 these were reduced to eight and less than half a column respectively; and, adding insult to injury, his music is said "to have fallen into dusty oblivion". And what could be more eloquent than the title of the biography published in 1959: "The Forgotten Master"?

Louis Spohr was born in Brunswick, central Germany, in 1784. Both his parents were musical, and the child, on being given violin lessons, made such astonishing progress that he rapidly outstripped his first teachers. At the same time he showed a precocious ability and enthusiasm for composition. A few months of instruction in harmony and counterpoint from an elderly organist named Hartung did little more than discourage the youth; and it was only by assiduously studying the scores of other composers that Spohr learned the technique of composition.

In this respect it is interesting to read (in Spohr's own words) the impression he received upon seeing a Mozart opera when he was 15:

From that time onward and for the rest of my life, Mozart was my idol and my ideal. I still remember vividly the enchantment of the first time I heard *The Magic Flute* and *Don Giovanni*, and how I could not rest until I had borrowed the scores and burrowed into them.

As a violinist, Spohr received a more formal training – as much by chance as by design. When he was 14 his father, a severe man, sent him off on his own to Hamburg to make his own way as an itinerant musician. The long journey proved fruitless, and the young Spohr returned to Brunswick on foot. Being unwilling to face his father with the news that he had failed to launch a career, he personally petitioned the Duke of Brunswick for assistance. The Duke, impressed by Spohr's gifts, gave him an appointment in the Court orchestra, and provided for him to study with a first-class teacher, Franz Eck, a concert violinist of the Mannheim School. It is interesting to note that in order to study with Eck, the eighteen-year-old Spohr had to accompany his teacher on a concert tour to St Petersburg – a journey which, incredible as it may seem today, lasted a whole year. The concert he gave at the Court of Brunswick upon his return showed the immense progress he had made in the year he had spent under Eck's direction: and so in 1804, at the age of 20, Spohr embarked upon the illustrious career which was to earn for him the reputation as "the finest violinist among the composers, the finest composer among the violinists." The following review, published in a musical journal in Leipzig in 1804, shows that Spohr was already establishing his reputation as one of the foremost virtuosi of the first half of the 19th Century:

Herr Spohr gave a concert in Leipzig on December 10, 1804, and a second, in response to many requests, on December 17. In both concerts he afforded us a stimulating pleasure such as we have not enjoyed from any other violinist within our memory, with the possible exception of Rode. Herr Spohr ranks without doubt among the finest of living violinists. One would be astonished at his achievements, particularly at so tender an age, could such sheer pleasure permit of cold astonishment. His concertos are among the most beautiful in existence. With respect to the Concerto in D minor particularly, we know of no other violin concerto to compare with it, either for invention, substance and charm, or for exactness and thoroughness. His individuality inclines him toward grandeur and a sentiment lightly touched with melancholy. This applies also to his playing. Herr Spohr can manage anything, but it is these characteristics that are most compelling. Perfect purity, security, precision, the most brilliant finish, every type of bowing, all varieties of violin tone, the most natural ease in the execution of such things, even in the most difficult passages – these render him one of the most skilful of virtuosos. But the soul that he breathes into his playing, the flight of fantasy, the fire, the tenderness, the intimacy of expression, the good taste, the insight into the spirit of the most varied compositions, and his ability to present them each in its own style and spirit – all this makes him a true artist.

Spohr's career as a virtuoso violinist, orchestral leader and conductor continued to flourish for over half a century. Thanks to a Herculean constitution (he stood well over six feet in height), he was able to undertake some 53 concert tours, visiting practically every city in Europe – a phenomenal achievement before the days of modern transport. In violin virtuosity he was the nearest rival to his flamboyant Italian contemporary, Nicolo Paganini, whom he regarded with a mixture of admiration and distaste; while he had no desire to compete with the Italian's spectacular wizardry, in versatility and depth of musicianship his mastery was supreme. The number and variety of his compositions speaks for itself. These include:

15 violin concertos; 9 symphonies and 8 other orchestral works; 16 choral works including 3 oratorios; 4 clarinet concertos; 1 concertante for violin and harp; no fewer than 11 operas; and a remarkable quantity of chamber music, including 34 string quartets, 7 string quintets, a nonet and

an octet for strings and wind, a septet for piano and wind, several works for harp solo and harp and violin, 14 duos for two violins – time prevents me from completing the list, which comes to some 200 compositions altogether.

However, one of Spohr's most important and fascinating works bears no Opus number: I refer to his autobiography, whose 600-odd pages afford the reader a revealing and informative insight into developments – both musical and social – in the rapidly changing era in which he lived. Spohr was born when Mozart was 28 years old. Less than 60 years later he conducted one of the first performances of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*.

In 1805 he was appointed Concertmaster of the Court Orchestra of the Duchy of Gotha. Here he met and later married a young harpist, Dorette Scheidler. Throughout their life together she accompanied him on his tours, and appeared with him as an associate artist in many of his concerts. It is to this association that we owe Spohr's highly attractive works for solo harp, and harp in combination with other instruments.

Spohr's composition bears the mark of his enquiring mind and his willingness to experiment in new ways of using instrumental combinations. In this he certainly paved the way for the Romantic composers who were to follow, even if most of his own works have not themselves survived in the concert hall. [...]

In 1812, after some highly successful concerts in Vienna, Spohr accepted the offer of a 3-year contract as conductor and concertmaster of the Theatre an der Wien. Shortly after his arrival in this great musical centre, he received – and accepted – a most unusual proposal. A wealthy businessman, Herr von Tost, offered to buy all of Spohr's forthcoming compositions. He would own the scores, have sole rights to their performance, and have the right to be present whenever they were performed, for a period of three years. The purpose behind this unusual arrangement was in fact quite simple. Spohr and his music were in strong demand in high society. As owner of the music, von Tost was able to gain admittance to social circles which could be to his advantage both socially and in the pursuit of his business interests.

I cannot pass by Spohr's sojourn in Vienna without some reference to the extensive passage in the autobiography in which he speaks of his meeting with Beethoven, and of the pathetic spectacle that the great man, now deaf, presented when attempting to conduct.

Of his conversation with Beethoven, Spohr writes:

It was uphill work trying to get anything across to him, as one had to shout loud enough to be heard two rooms away. Thereafter, Beethoven used to come frequently to this restaurant, and he also visited me in my apartment. Thus we became good acquaintances. He was a bit rough, not to say uncouth, but an honest eye peered out from beneath his bushy brows.

But the following passage gives us as much information about Spohr himself as about Beethoven.

From that time onward, as his increasing deafness made it impossible to hear any music at all, it was inevitable that this should adversely affect his fantasy. His constant striving to be original and to break new paths was no longer subject to aural control. Is it any wonder that

his works became steadily less coherent and less intelligible? There are those, to be sure, who flatter themselves that they understand these late works, and in their enthusiasm, go so far as to label them masterpieces. I am not among them, and confess freely that I have never been able to develop a taste for the later Beethoven. I include among these even the much admired Ninth Symphony, whose first three movements, despite flashes of genius, strike me as inferior to any of the movements of the preceding eight symphonies, and whose fourth movement I consider so monstrous and tasteless and, in its representation of Schiller's Ode, so trivial that I cannot imagine its having been written by a man of Beethoven's genius. I find in it a confirmation of what I noted in Vienna; namely; that Beethoven was wanting in aesthetic cultivation and feeling for beauty.

Spohr's own words lend weight to the view that he was essentially a conservative in his musical ideas, notwithstanding his willingness to experiment with form and instrumental mediums; this could help to explain his music's widespread popularity in his own day – it was immediately agreeable and enjoyable, without making the demands on its listeners that a more progressive or avant-garde style imposes. At the same time, such conservatism can easily lead to a composer's style becoming dated with the passing of time.

It is interesting to note in this respect that while Spohr's own love of Beethoven's quartets was confined to the early works of op. 18, his audiences sometimes found even these rather hard to assimilate: and he recounts how more than once, to assure the enjoyment of his listeners and hence his own success, he substituted the more immediately agreeable quartets of Rode, or his own compositions – works which, of course, have failed to withstand the test of time.

[... a passage about Spohr's violin concertos ...]

Spohr's contribution to our musical life is considerable, and in its variety it reflects his open, lively mind. He taught more than 200 students, and published a violin method which in its day was highly esteemed. He was the inventor of the chin-rest (a device which facilitates the holding of the violin between jaw and shoulder, and is now a standard piece of equipment); he is said to have been the first to conduct with a baton in England: the results he obtained gained rapid acceptance for the innovation.

Next year [1984], the 200th anniversary of the birth of Louis Spohr, we are likely to have the opportunity to hear more of his music: and this may well bring about a revival of interest in a composer considered by not a few to be due for a revival.

David Nalden (1983)

ADDENDUM: Spohr's *Mass for Double Choir* Op. 54

Indra Hughes (July 2010)

Preparing this unusual and interesting work for only its second New Zealand performance (the first was in 1981, by the Dorian Choir under Peter Godfrey) has been enjoyable and fascinating. David Nalden has suggested that Spohr's innate conservatism might simultaneously account for both the popularity of his music in his lifetime and its subsequent descent into oblivion: this may apply to this

Mass as much as to his other works, for it is certainly the case that Spohr's emphasis here is to reflect something of the styles of earlier masters, particularly those of the Renaissance.

The inspiration for the setting came from a meeting in Heidelberg in 1820 between Spohr and Anton Thibaut, a choral conductor whose choir sang only Italian Renaissance sacred music. Spohr attended some of the choir's rehearsals and became fascinated by this repertoire – though he did not share Thibaut's view that it surpassed in quality anything that had been written since. He studied the scores at Thibaut's piano (Thibaut wouldn't let him take them away), and wrote "...the plain, splendid style of those works impressed me greatly...I was thus able to learn a great deal about the old masters' part-writing and their sequence of harmonies. In doing so, I became eager to try myself in the composition of polyphonic a cappella church music. During the following summer I wrote the mass for ten voices, Op. 54."

The Mass is laid out for an expansive canvas of two 5-part choirs (each SSATB) and 5 soloists (also SSATB). Choir I is labelled 'coro minore', suggesting that Spohr intends a smaller group of singers than in Choir II; since he probably expected the work to be sung by a relatively large choir (the first public performance was given by the Berliner Singakademie in 1822), we have decided not to follow this direction for this performance by Musica Sacra, a much smaller choir. At no point does Spohr avail himself of the opportunity to write in ten real parts, like the Venetian polychoral composers such as Antonio Lotti, Giovanni Gabrieli or Domenico Scarlatti: most of the time the two choirs answer each other antiphonally, like a tennis match, and they often combine into one 5-part choir.

Is the neglect of this work justified? There are many 'forgotten' works, some of them by great composers, that do not deserve to remain unperformed. Equally, there are some terrible works, even by great composers, that should not be heard – one thinks, for example, of some of Beethoven's banal early piano pieces. Perhaps Spohr's Mass cannot lay claim to the word 'masterpiece'. It is not without its *longeurs* – the opening sections of both the Gloria and Credo, for example, may seem a little laboured, repetitive and lacking in true inspiration, and Spohr ties himself in harmonic knots occasionally, even ending up in the remote key of F flat major at one point; once or twice a good idea (Quoniam to solus, Et resurrexit) seems to dry up before Spohr has done anything interesting with it. But these slight shortcomings may be thought trivial when set against many other splendid moments. The opening Kyrie is lovingly crafted with beautifully expressive phrases; the Christe channels JS Bach with appropriate contrapuntal erudition, as does the splendid fugue at "in Gloria Dei Patris", complete with a semi-regular chromatic countersubject, close strettos and a tonic pedal-point. The Sanctus is perhaps the finest movement: the serene opening is interrupted at "pleni sunt coeli" by a vigorous and tuneful double fugue; the opening of the Benedictus could have been written by Mozart (if it had, people would rave about it); and the Agnus Dei, with its dramatically whispered choral chanting, seems to foreshadow Verdi's *Requiem* by more than fifty years.