

The True story of LOUIS SPOHR

Johnstone-music note: the following information is of great interest to us today, for the simple fact that it was written in the nineteenth century and thus much closer to the action and events than we are today. The writing shows a deep understanding and respect of the day towards the musicians that it features ...

From A BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF FIDDLERS
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* SPOHR, Louis, born at Brunswick, April 5th, 1784, died at Cassel, Oct. 22nd, 1859. Violin virtuoso and composer of the highest order. His father was a physician and a good performer on the flute, and through the influence of their " music at home " the talent of young Louis, the eldest child, was quickly developed, and at the early age of 4 or 5, a small violin was put into his hands. Being placed under a professor of the name of Riemenschneider, he was soon able to take his part in the performance of trios for piano, violin and flute. About two years afterwards, a violinist named Dufour gave the boy some lessons, and persuaded the parents to devote their son entirely to music. Spohr's father, who intended the boy for the medical profession, was at first averse to this suggestion, but ultimately, from his own love of music, he consented. It was while under the tuition of Dufour that young Spohr made his first essays in composition which consisted principally of duets for the violin.

Spohr's first position in the musical profession was that of musician in the ducal orchestra at Brunswick; the Duke himself a performer on the violin, taking special interest in the young musician. Spohr now applied himself to the study of harmony and counterpoint, and for this purpose studied under an old organist named Hartung. He was next advised to place himself under Maucourt the concert director and the best violinist in Brunswick. The Duke of Brunswick wishing his young protege to have, if possible, further and better instruction, the name of Viotti was mentioned and was written to in London, where he then was. This, however, happened to be the period when the great master had relinquished the violin in favour of the commercial speculations which terminated so disastrously for Viotti. Spohr was next placed under the tuition of Francis Eck with whom, with the Duke's consent and patronage, Spohr set out for St. Petersburg upon an artistic tour.

On his return in 1803, he applied himself more studiously to his instrument, and became first court violinist, with a salary sufficient for his moderate wants. Shortly after this he undertook a concert tour in conjunction with the 'cellist Beneke, through the principal German towns, which contributed materially to his reputation.

In 1805 Spohr was offered and accepted, with the consent of his patron, the position of konzertmeister, solo violin, and composer to the Duke of Gotha, whose orchestra was considered one of the finest in Europe. His salary was now five hundred thalers per annum. In the following year he married Dorette Schiedler, the daughter of the principal Court singer, and herself an excellent performer on the harp. In 1807 the two artists set out on a musical tour which resulted in great success artistically as well as financially.

In 1809 they started on an artistic tour in Russia, but they were recalled by the Court chamberlain, who said that the Duchess could not spare them from the Court concerts, but would liberally reward them. Spohr returned and for three years devoted a large share of his time to composition, during which period he wrote a number of important works for the orchestra and for the violin. In 1812 Spohr visited Vienna and gave a series of concerts. The impression he created there was so profound that he was offered the direction of the An der Wien Theatre, at a salary three times that received at Gotha. Spohr at once accepted the position which he retained until 1815, after which he spent two years concert-giving with remarkable success. On his return home he accepted the post of director of music at the Frankfort Theatre, and remained there two years.

In 1820 Spohr made his first appearance in this country at a Philharmonic Concert, when his debut was thus noticed by an eminent reviewer

"He first played a concerto in the dramatic style: the composition was very clever and classed under its proper head. A quartet, in which he afterwards assisted, was so entirely calculated to display the single performer, as to injure its effect as a concerted piece. His manner is totally without pretention ; his tone fine, his intonation admirable, and his execution of the most finished order."

On another occasion this critic observes,

"We have the traces, in Spohr's execution, of a mind continually turning towards refinement, and deserting strength for polish. His tone is pure and delicate, rather than remarkable for volume or richness, his taste was cultivated to the highest excess, and his execution was so finished, that it appeared to encroach, in a measure, upon the vigour of his performance."

But he was very far from being deficient in the energy necessary to make a great player. The fact seems to be, that this quality, which for its inherent pre-eminence is most distinguishable in other violinists, was, in Spohr, cast into secondary importance, and rendered less discernible by the pre-dominating influence of his superior refinement. His delicacy was so beautiful and so frequent an object of admiration that his force was lowered in the comparison. But, though it must be confessed that his bow arm had not the openness and command so peculiarly striking in Mori, yet he could sustain and protract his tones to an extraordinary duration. His method of taking staccato passages was excellent; but the saltations he frequently made in his passages of execution could not be said to accord with the general composedness of his manner. And as it is frequently the consequence of a too subtle habit of refining, to obliterate the stronger traces of sensibility, so his expression was more remarkable for polished elegance, than for those powerful and striking modifications of tone, that are the offspring of intense feeling. It is probably owing to this softening down of the bright and brilliant effects, that he failed (if such a man could be ever said to fail) in eliciting those stronger bursts of the public approbation, that attend those exhibitions of art that are directed against, and that reach, the affections of a mixed audience. Thus, though in the very first rank of his profession and of talent, Spohr perhaps excited a lower degree of interest than has frequently attended the performance of men, whose excellences were far below his standard. But such is the common fate of every extreme cultivation and polish. It transcends the judgment of the million. The Roman critics remarked the pre-eminent beauty with which Spohr enriched his playing, by a strict imitation of vocal effects. They said he was the finest singer upon the violin that ever appeared." This was, perhaps, the highest praise that could be bestowed upon the gifted violinist.

The appreciation of his merits, both as composer and executant, was in the highest degree flattering. Spohr's autobiography thus relates his first experience at a Philharmonic concert.

"After I had been welcomed in a friendly manner by the directors of the Philharmonic Society some of whom spoke German and others French, a council was held respecting the programme of the first concert. At this I was required to play solo twice and to lead as first violin. To this I replied that I was quite ready to perform the first, but must beg that I might be permitted to lead in one of the subsequent concerts, as my solo play would appear to less advantage if both were required of me on one and the same evening.

"Clear as this was acknowledged to be by some of the gentlemen who were themselves solo-players, yet it gave rise at first to a long and earnest discussion, as it was contrary to the custom of the Society, but at length it was complied with. Still greater subject of offence, however, was my request to be permitted on this my first appearance to play my own compositions only. The Philharmonic Society, in order to exclude from their programme all shallow and worthless virtuosi-concerti, had laid down the law, that with the exception of the pianoforte concerti of Mozart and Beethoven, no similar musical pieces should be played, and that solo players had only to perform that which they should select.

"Nevertheless, after Ries had continued the discussion in English, and therefore unintelligibly to me, and represented to the gentlemen that my violin-concerts in Germany would therefore become excluded by their bann, they at length yielded in this also. I therefore at the first Philharmonic concert, came forward with my cantabile scena, and in the second part with a solo quartet in E major, and met with great and general applause. As a composer it afforded me an especial gratification that the whole of the directors now shared the opinion of Mr. Ries, and as a violinist the greatest pleasure, that old Viotti who had always been my pattern, and was to have been my instructor in my youth, was among the auditory and spoke to me in great praise of my play. As I had thus so successfully passed through the ordeal of my first appearance in London, I devoted the next day to the delivery of my letters of recommendation. Not knowing a word of English this was for me by no means a pleasant business and brought me into frequent perplexity."

In 1821 Spohr accepted the post of conductor of the orchestra at the Court Theatre at Cassel, to the duties of which he applied himself with zeal, and finally succeeded in establishing his orchestra as the best in Germany. In this position he continued until the year 1857, when a rescript granting him a pension of fifteen hundred thalers was issued, as a reward of long service and advanced age. It was during his directorship of the Cassel orchestra that Spohr produced his great orchestral compositions his operas, symphonies, and sacred music.

It is interesting at this point to turn again to the autobiography and ascertain what views "the first singer on the violin" held regarding the performances of the great contemporary players.

"That Lafont's excellence restricts itself always to but a few pieces at once, and that he practises the same concerto by the year together before he plays it in public, is well known. Since I have heard the perfect execution which he attains by this means, I certainly will not cavil with this application of all his powers to the one object ; but I could not imitate him, and cannot even understand how one can bring one's self to practice the same piece of music for four or five hours daily, but still less how it is to be done without eventually losing every vestige of real art, in such a mechanical mode of proceeding."

"Baillot is, in the technical scope of his play, almost as perfect, and his diversity of manner, shews that he is so, without resorting to the same desperate means. Besides his own compositions, he plays almost all those of ancient and modern times. On one and the same evening he gave a quintet of Boccherini, a quintet of Haydn, and three of his own compositions a concerto, an air varie, and a rondo. He played all these things with the most perfect purity, and with the expression which is peculiar to his manner. His expression, nevertheless, seemed to me more artificial than natural, and indeed his whole execution, from the too salient evidence of the means by which he gives that expression, has the appearance of mannerism. His bow stroke is skilful, and rich in shades of expression, but not so free as Lafont's, and therefore his tone is not so beautiful as that of the latter, and the mechanical process of the up and down stroke of the bow is too audible. His compositions are distinguished above almost all those of any other Parisian violinist by their correctness, neither can they be denied a certain originality, but being somewhat artificial, mannered, and out of date in style, the hearer remains cold and without a sense of emotion. You know that he frequently plays and takes great pleasure in Boccherini's quintets.

I was desirous of hearing him in these quintets, with about a dozen of which I am acquainted, in order to see whether, from the manner in which he executes them he could succeed in making one forget the poverty of the compositions. But well as they were given by him, the frequent childishness of the melodies, and the poverty of the harmonies (almost always three-voiced only) were no less unpleasing to me, than in all those I had heard before.

One can hardly understand how a cultivated artist like Baillot, to whom our treasures in compositions of this kind are known, can bring himself to play those quintets still, whose worth consists only in the regard had to the period and circumstances under which they were written. But that they are here listened to with as much pleasure as a quintet of Mozart is another proof that Parisians cannot distinguish the good from the bad, and are at least half a century behind in art. I heard Habeneck play two airs varies of his composition. He is a brilliant violinist and plays much with great rapidity and ease. His tone and his bow-stroke are somewhat coarse."

"Kreutzer Junior, the bi other and pupil of the elder, played to me a new, very brilliant and graceful trio of his brother's composition. The manner in which he executed it reminded me some-what of the style of the elder one, and satisfied me that they are the purest players of all the Parisian violinists. Young Kreutzer is wanting in physical power, he is somewhat ill, and dare not play sometimes for months together. His tone therefore, is weak, but in other respects his play is pure, spirited and full of expression."

"In June 1830 Paganini came to Cassel and gave two concerts in the theatre, which I heard with great interest. His left hand, and his constantly pure intonation were to me astonishing. But in his compositions and his execution I found a strange mixture of the highly genial and childishly tasteless, by which one felt alternately charmed and disappointed, so that the impression left as a whole was, after frequent hearing, by no means satisfactory to me. As his visit took place just on Whitsunday, I took him the next day to Wilhelmshohe, where he dined with me, and was very lively, indeed somewhat extravagantly so."

"Ole Bull has lately given two concerts at the theatre and greatly charmed the public. His many toned strokes and the accurate certainty of the left hand are remarkable, but like Paganini, he sacrifices too much to the tricks of the art. His tone on the weak strings is bad, and he can only use the A and D string on the lower part and pianissimo. This gives to his play a great monotony when he cannot bring in his tricks of art."

In the year 1831 was completed the great "Violin School," a work which has received the highest favour wherever the art of violin playing is cultivated with any degree of earnestness.

Three years later occurred the death of his wife, who had borne him a large family, and had been his most sympathetic and devoted companion. At the time of this calamity Spohr was at work on his great oratorio "Calvary," but he was so broken down by his bereavement, that it was several months before he could resume his labours. Of the performance of this oratorio on Good Friday, 1835, Spohr relates in his diary: "The thought that my wife did not live to listen to its first performance sensibly lessened the satisfaction I felt at this my most successful work."

In 1839 this oratorio was given at the Norwich Festival, the great master being present to conduct it. After Spohr had been a widower two years he became enamoured of one of the daughters of Chief Councillor Pfeiffer, who possessed great musical skill and powers upon the pianoforte, and was twenty years the junior of her suitor. The marriage took place on January 3rd, 1836.

Shortly after his second marriage, Spohr and his young wife made a long journey, visiting the principal German cities, exciting everywhere universal admiration. In a word, when not actively engaged with his Cassel orchestra, he was ever conducting his great works at one or other of the musical centres of Germany. His subsequent visits to England were made in the years 1843, 1847, 1852, and 1853. In 1857 Spohr broke his arm, and was thereby compelled to relinquish the violin. On the 12th April, 1859, he made his last appearance as conductor this was at Meiningen and in the following October the great violinist-composer passed away.

To enumerate seriatim all the compositions of this prolific composer would exceed the space at disposal. They include the whole range of musical structure, Oratorios, Symphonies, Masses, Operas, Chamber music, and educational works.

His principal works for the string family may be briefly summarised as follows :

33 quartets;
4 double quartets;
Sextet;
7 quintets;
15 concertos for violin with orchestra;
Grand Polonaise for violin with orchestra;
4 pots-pourris for violin with orchestra;
Sonatas for harp and violin;
Rondos for do.;
14 duets for two violins;
36 studies by Fiorillo with 2nd violin part added.

For strings with other instruments:

Nonet for violin, tenor, 'cello, flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon and double-bass;
Octet for violin, two tenors, 'cello, clarinet, two horns, and double-bass;
Quintet for pianoforte, two violins, tenor, and 'cello;
Septet for piano- forte, violin, 'cello, flute, clarinet, horn, and bassoon;
5 trios for pianoforte, violin, and 'cello;
3 duos for pianoforte and violin.
Two concertos for clarinet with orchestra etc.

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