

LOUIS SPOHR AND HIS INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN ORCHESTRAL CULTURE

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IF YOU take a closer look at the personalities who helped to form the musical scene of New York in the middle of the nineteenth century, you will find that rather more of them are linked in various ways to the German city of Kassel than statistics would lead you to expect. Certainly, the most prominent among them is Ureli Corelli Hill (1802-75), founder of the New York Philharmonic, who visited Kassel for almost a year in 1835-36.

William Scharfenberg (1819-95) helped him in forming the Philharmonic, taking several important posts on the management board between 1844 and 1866 as well as performing in countless concerts as a well-respected pianist. He is also very closely linked to Kassel for it was his birthplace. So was Joseph Mosenthal (1834-96) who played the violin in the orchestra and in 1892 Krehbiel still lists him as a performing member of the New York Philharmonic. In conducting the Mendelssohn Glee Club he rendered even more services to the musical scene in New York.

Also from Kassel came Emilie Spohr-Zahn (1807-95) who gave several concerts as soprano in the early 1840s. All of these people, and several more, have links to the rather small, picturesque capital of the former German Electorate of Hesse-Kassel. When Hill arrived there in 1835, he was rather disappointed at how small it seemed: "The next day about four o'clock we arrived at Cassel. At first, when Cassel came in view I was disappointed at its appearance, the capital of Hessia where the court is, opera house, etc. etc. It was not so large as I expected but the reason of its appearing so small is the many trees which in a great measure with the undulating ground one observes at a distance."¹

With these last words Hill already puts his first disappointment into perspective. It is not only in this little detail that Hill proves to be an accurate observer. Research into most of the names and events in Kassel which Hill mentions in his diary shows that he is a fairly reliable observer. Indeed he was not to have many more reasons to complain about Kassel, at least no musical ones.

The Electorate of Hesse-Kassel was not quite as unimportant as we might assume today and when Elector Wilhelm II (1777-1847) took power in 1821 he had plans to make his opera house one of the best in Germany. The first step on this road was to engage Louis Spohr as the new Hofkapellmeister in 1822 after Carl Maria von Weber had declined the post. In the following years Spohr turned the Kassel orchestra into one of the best in Germany or even Europe as many contemporaries (among them Ureli Corelli Hill and Richard Wagner) confirm.

In long years of hard work Spohr formed an excellent orchestra, especially through his intensive rehearsals. He tended to hold rather more rehearsals than others and he was very strict. Hill describes in his diary: "This orchestra in general performed well together, better than many that has a greater name. This probably is owing in a great measure to their excellent Capel Maitre Spohr, he in rehearsals never lets a fault pass unnoticed, nor without its being corrected, most

always corresponding to *his* ideas of perfection, which are very fastidious one may be sure of.”²

This opinion is confirmed by William Sterndale Bennett (1816-75) who visited Kassel in 1842 and wrote about Spohr’s orchestra in his journal: “I only wish our wind instruments in England would play as well in tune as they do here.”³ With this quality of his orchestra Spohr also helped Richard Wagner’s *Flying Dutchman* to its breakthrough when he performed it in 1843. This was the first performance of the opera after its première by Wagner himself in Dresden in the same year. Wagner was very well aware of what he owed to Spohr as his letters from those days clearly show.

But Spohr was not only an important and influential orchestra leader, not only a violin virtuoso of international fame and a composer who was regarded by many as one of the best German composers after Beethoven’s death. He was also an important teacher who attracted students from all over the world. And here is the missing link between all those Kassel-related musicians in New York I mentioned above.

Hill was possibly the student with the longest journey from home but he was certainly not the only foreign musician who came to Kassel to study with Spohr. There were young musicians from England, Russia, Poland, Norway, France and many other countries. The young French violinist Alexander Malibran (1823-67) even considered Kassel to be the “Holy Land” when he arrived there in 1845, just because Spohr lived and worked there.⁴

So what were the principles of Spohr’s teaching that made it so attractive to young musicians and how did it help to enable many of them to become important founders of orchestras and musicians of influence? The answer goes back as far as Spohr’s own youth. The influence of the Enlightenment was very strong in Brunswick, where Spohr was born in 1784, and especially in Spohr’s family.

Clive Brown points out: “During his childhood and early years he was strongly influenced by his father. Carl Heinrich Spohr was in many ways a child of the Enlightenment, adding to the sturdy independence of his burgher ancestors a spirit of cosmopolitan enquiry [...]. He showed his awareness of the ideals of such spokesmen of the Enlightenment as Diderot, Rousseau and Voltaire in the rearing of his children, in whom he installed a consciousness of humanitarian principles, the equal rights of all men, and a code of morality which required the individual to be responsible to his own conscience for his actions.”⁵

Another important concept in Spohr’s later life and teaching also had its origins in his youth. His grandfather strongly opposed the idea of young Louis becoming a musician and “he averred that a musician was nothing better than ‘a tavern fiddler who played to dancers.’”⁶ For the rest of his life, Spohr fought persistently for the improvement of the social status of musicians. This included the material needs as well as artistic dignity.

When the latter was in question Spohr was not afraid to oppose the mighty as he, for example, did in 1808 in Stuttgart, at this time capital of the kingdom of Württemberg. Here, he refused to play at court unless the custom of playing cards during the musical performances was suspended. Surprisingly, the king agreed to this condition and Spohr’s performance went undisturbed, although the card-playing started again right after he had finished and the other musicians in this concert did not get much attention from the card players.

The philanthropic approach in Spohr’s teaching is also foreshadowed in his own schooldays. At home he found several editions of the magazine *Der Kinderfreund*, from which he took the subject matter for his first trial in opera and which was edited by the philanthropic writer Christian Felix Weiße (1726-1804). The philanthropic educational approach was mainly formed by Joachim Heinrich Campe (1746-1818), who claimed that nobody was to be hindered in finding his own fortune by means of his individual abilities and that everybody should be able

to develop himself freely and without restraints. The enlightened Duke Carl Wilhelm Ferdinand (1735-1806) engaged Campe to reorganise the school system in the duchy of Brunswick.

In his travels as violin virtuoso through Germany and Europe and in his several positions as violinist and Kapellmeister in Brunswick, Gotha, Vienna and Frankfurt, Spohr developed all these influences and basic ideas into what was to become his own unique way of teaching. Parallel to this, his opinions were to become what his second wife, Marianne Pfeiffer, called his “unreachable ideals”. These aimed on the one hand at the social security, the dignity and autonomy of musicians specifically and on the other hand at a dignified and equal togetherness of all men in general.

Thus he moved with imperturbable calm and goal-directedness through the conflicts of his time and his life, as for instance in the tension between his role as Hofkapellmeister and thus representative of the court on the one hand and as an idol of the liberal bourgeoisie and promoter of bourgeois music culture on the other.

This perseverance can be seen very vividly in a caricature by Ludwig Emil Grimm, the youngest of the brothers Grimm, that is labelled as “a small storm in the beautiful month of delight, May 1851”. The woman who clings to Spohr’s coat is his second wife, Marianne (1807-92).⁷ This picture also reminds me of the one that his pupil Malibran draws of Spohr’s role in the stormy events of 1848: “Soon afterwards the population of Kassel rose, too, chased away the [Elector’s] bodyguard one night, the civil guard was armed and the city was filled with barricades. The first thing I did the next morning was that I wanted to see that nothing had happened to the master. How astonished was I when I recognised him from afar by his little conic cap, standing on a barricade and having pressed both hands against his hips, as it was his habit. ‘Good morning’, he called, when he noticed me and when I reached him he added, carefully examining the strength of the barricade with his foot: ‘they are making the barricades here as strong as in Paris, aren’t they?’ ”⁸

Already in the unrest of 1830, which resulted in the Electorate of Hesse gaining a constitution that even Karl Marx described as “the most liberal constitution that ever was announced in Europe”, Spohr had made no secret of his position. In honour of the constitution which was celebrated in the theatre with a performance of his opera *Jessonda*, Spohr had especially composed the hymn *Festive Chorus of Hesse on the Introduction of the Constitution*.⁹ Neither in the revolutionary events nor among the listeners to the debates of the constitutional assembly was the composer absent. His awareness of social needs also made him initiate a fund for the widows and orphans of deceased members of his orchestra.

His open mind was also reflected in his teaching. For one thing he did not care what religion his students practised. Among them were many Jews – the above-mentioned Joseph Mosenthal was only one of them – which was not quite as normal even in his day as it should have been. If his Jewish students could not afford to do so themselves, he even arranged kosher meals for them. Unlike many of his contemporaries he always fought for an understanding of the different religions and it was very probably Wagner’s ideas of “Judaism in music” which led to Spohr cooling down their personal relations although he continued to support Wagner’s music.

This support reflects another important aspect. Even if he did not share the aesthetical or political views of the composer, Spohr felt obliged to perform their music and thus enable his audiences to follow the latest developments in the art of composition. Quite unlike many other conductors, he understood himself to be just the conduit of the work he performed. In addition he provided a great variety of music in his concerts.

Therefore his students came in contact with a lot of different music as he was far from making them play only his own works. For instance, he held courses on the playing of quartets by Fesca

and one of his favourite students, August Kömpel (1832-91) had to play the solo partitas by Bach. Thus the music his pupils had to study reflected his open mind and this made it possible for another student of his, Karl Will (1812-92) to play the violin in the première of Brahms' first symphony on November 4th 1876 in Karlsruhe only a few weeks after he had played first violin in the first complete performance of Wagner's *Ring* in Bayreuth.

But Spohr's musical farsightedness did not only extend to the compositions played, it also encompassed violin playing itself. Quite unlike many of his colleagues, Spohr did not try to produce specialised virtuosi. Of course his students had to be virtuosi on the violin and they got the best possible training for that but they also had to take lessons in musical theory, which until 1842 was provided by Moritz Hauptmann (1792-1868), a former pupil of Spohr and close friend. In 1842 he was appointed Thomaskantor in Leipzig.

Apart from theory and composition, Spohr's pupils also had to practise chamber music as he had formed a quartet society where they could gain valuable experience in string quartet playing. He also performed violin duos with his students as another caricature by Ludwig Emil Grimm shows, as well as many contemporary concert programmes and reports. The caricature shows Spohr playing a duo with one of his favourite pupils, Jean Joseph Bott (1826-95) while Grimm's daughter, Ideke, is playing with a cat.¹⁰

Bott was a son of the musician Anton Bott in Kassel. At the age of seven he had already performed in public and later he became one of the favourite pupils of Spohr who thought he might have the potential to become a second Mozart. Bott could not fulfil these expectations but nevertheless gained some importance in German musical life.

Unfortunately he became increasingly addicted to alcohol and in 1877 fell drunk from the podium while conducting Liszt's oratorio *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth* so that the composer, who was present, had to direct the performance to its conclusion himself. In 1887 Bott emigrated to New York and it was in this city that he died. His future problems are already indicated in the Grimm caricature by the small beer bottles placed at his feet.

But the musicians who studied with Spohr also had to perform in the orchestra in the theatre where they had to play in different positions. For this purpose they even had to learn a second instrument and play it in the orchestra. There were also two orchestral societies in Kassel (Euterpe and Eunomia) with which Spohr worked closely. Here his students were not only able to perform as soloists as they also did in the official concerts of the Hofkapelle, they had also the opportunity to conduct the orchestra. They also had to help with the direction of the Caecilian Society, an amateur choir which Spohr had formed immediately after his arrival in Kassel in 1822.

Thus the young students gained a sound musical education in the approximately two years they usually studied with Spohr in Kassel. But their education was not limited to music. According to the philanthropic principles mentioned above, Spohr adopted a holistic approach to teaching. He also cared for the physical education of his pupils, for example by swimming with them in the river Fulda. He went on hikes with them and visited mines and factories to show them how working-class people lived. He made them study at least one foreign language and improved their general education as he was convinced that the social status of musicians could only be improved if they were able to present themselves in an adequate way.

All this taken together resulted in almost ideal conditions for his pupils. Especially those who were to emigrate to the USA were able to make use of the many things they learnt in Kassel. I will now introduce some of them.

Ureli Corelli Hill is an exception as he is the only one who lived in the USA before he came to Kassel. But he nevertheless certainly profited from his experiences in Kassel when he founded

the New York Philharmonic Society in 1842. A certain affection for his teacher might explain the fact that in the first ten seasons there was at least one work by Spohr per season in the concert programmes of the New York Philharmonic. Hill also might well have taken a leaf out of Spohr's book as he was a "major figure in music festivals in England and Germany"¹¹ when he organised a large-scale music festival in New York City in 1846. When it came to the question of who should be the musical director, Hill first thought of his teacher Spohr and invited him in a letter (November 16th 1844):

Dear & Respected Sir,

It has been resolved to produce a Grand Musical Festival in N. York the first that has taken place in America – which is to come off either in the Autumn of 1845 or the Spring of 1846 which will depend upon contingencies principally as respects the proposition in the name of the committee which I am about to make to you – From the renown [sic] of your name far and near – your stupendous talents – & your known liberality in the promotion of the cause of the musical Art both in Germany & England particularly I am in the name of the Musical Festival committee (of which I am a member) we are directed to solicit your co-operation as Conductor on the occasion – Your passage from Liverpool to N.Y. and back in a Steamer will be provided and \$1000 at least will be guaranteed to you in the Event of your consent to come being acceded [sic] to – *if you should be able to come we should want an immediate answer.*"¹²

Unfortunately Spohr was not able to consent nor was Mendelssohn whom Hill also asked. Hill signed the letter to Spohr with the words "I remain your sincere friend and grateful pupil U C Hill".

Another of Spohr's pupils, Joseph Mosenthal, soon joined Hill in New York City. Mosenthal's elder brother, Samuel Herman Mosenthal (1821-77) became a famous playwright who is still known today as the librettist of Otto Nicolai's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The first musical teacher of Joseph was his father. After he finished his studies with Spohr, Joseph emigrated to the USA in 1853 and then played in the first violins in the New York Philharmonic Orchestra for forty years.

Together with William Mason (1829-1908), Theodore Thomas (1835-1905) and others he founded a series of concerts named "the Mason and Thomas Soirees of Chamber Music" which continued until 1868. He also conducted the Mendelssohn Glee Club from 1867 to 1896 and this amateur choir still believes that "the success of the Club in the early years is due to Mosenthal's personality and musical attainments more than any other single cause"¹³

The description of Mosenthal's musical work which is given on the choir's website home page resembles the one of his teacher in an astonishing way: "Perfection of technique was almost a fetish with Mosenthal and through him the Club came to have an abandon, an absolute freedom from technical restraint and a vitality that electrified its audiences. His style at rehearsal was infamous."¹⁴

In 1896 Mosenthal died on the premises of the Mendelssohn Glee Club where he had fought his way through cold and snow because he did not want to suspend the rehearsal because of the bad weather. But tragically the rehearsal was suspended by a higher force as Mosenthal died from exhaustion surrounded by members of his beloved choir.

So far William Scharfenberg is not "officially" regarded as a student of Louis Spohr but I would strongly plead for our counting him as such. His birth in Kassel occurred on February 22nd 1819 and his father was Carl Scharfenberg, oboist and horn player in Spohr's orchestra.

William studied piano with Hummel in Weimar and the fact that he also played the violin in the New York Philharmonic Orchestra as Howard Shanet notes¹⁵ proves that he was also a gifted violinist and therefore he must have been taught the instrument at some stage.

It is therefore very unlikely that he, being a talented young musician from Kassel and a son of one of the orchestra members, should not have been taught the violin by Spohr. American sources register him as a student of Spohr, anyway. The *New York Times* for example in 1869 refers to him as “William Scharfenberg, a pupil of Spohr”.¹⁶ Scharfenberg was an important figure in building the New York Philharmonic. As well as playing piano and violin he also served as secretary of the Philharmonic Society in season 1844-45, as vice-president 1850-52, as treasurer 1853-57, assistant 1858-62 and finally as president 1863-66.¹⁷

In 1841 Spohr’s daughter Emilie arrived in New York following her husband, Johann Wilhelm Zahn. As Emilie Spohr-Zahn she gave several concerts but she also arranged concerts and contacts for musicians who came from Kassel to New York.

Not to New York but to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was the path of another pupil of Spohr, Christopher Bach (1835-1927). Born in the little valley, Niederhone, near Eschwege, which belonged to the Electorate of Hesse-Kassel, he soon made his way into the capital and became a student with Spohr in 1854. A year later he emigrated with his parents and relatives to Milwaukee.

In the same year he founded a string sextet which eventually developed into an orchestra. Andrew Aiken and Louis Proctor described the background of this foundation in 1897: “Upon reaching Milwaukee he found himself without funds and earned his first dollar by performing on the viola in a string quartet. Immediately upon this beginning, he took the position of cornetist in Theodore Knoll’s band, at that time the principal band in Milwaukee consisting of twelve men. In these positions, however, his chances of success were too limited and, full of ambition and artistic enthusiasm, he organised in October of the same year the first string sextet, taking the position of director and first violinist. At the start he considered it his mission to present to his audiences only the better class of music and his efforts in this direction were recognised to the extent that he was busily engaged furnishing the music at all leading private and public receptions and club entertainments.”¹⁸

In 1865 he started to give regular concerts on Sunday afternoons with his “Bach’s Orchestra”. He gave concerts in parks, theatres, the West Side Turner Hall and also in beer gardens and acquainted the Mid-West with the works of Beethoven, Schubert and Wagner. He soon became famous and was able to give successful concerts in Saint Louis, Kansas City and Chicago. He conducted “Bach’s Orchestra” until 1915.

From 1878 until 1884 he also conducted the Milwaukee Liederkrantz which he had helped to found. On his death in 1927 the *Milwaukee Sentinel* wrote: “In the death of Christopher Bach, Milwaukee has lost its best known orchestra and band leader who became nationally famous and whose name did not pass into oblivion when he laid down the baton some fifteen years ago.”¹⁹

His output as a composer comprises more than a hundred marches, concert overtures, quadrilles, three comic operas and – proving his good sense of humour – a B-A-C-H polka. His estate is kept in the Marquette University Library in Milwaukee. Here we can find many arrangements of works in the German romantic tradition, among them the Sixth Symphony and *Jessonda* overture by his teacher Louis Spohr.

Some scholars claim that the musical life of Lowell, Massachusetts, owes much to Oskar Greiner of Columbus, Ohio, and much to Karl Spohr, two further students of Louis Spohr who emigrated to the USA²⁰, but so far I have not found any further proof of that.

Anyway, especially if you take into account that the Spohr pupils Moritz Hauptmann and

Ferdinand David (1810-73) educated many American students (such as Dudley Buck, 1839-1909, and William Mason) in their newly-formed Leipzig conservatory, you will probably admit that Louis Spohr had a strong influence on American orchestral culture even though he never had the chance to visit the USA himself.

Notes:

- 1 U.C.Hill, Diary, 1835-37, transcription by Barbara Haws, New York Philharmonic, p.33.
- 2 *Ibid*, p.40.
- 3 *The Life of William Sterndale Bennett* by his son, J.R.Sterndale Bennett, Cambridge 1907, p.117.
- 4 Malibran 1860, p.176.
- 5 Brown 2006, p.3.
- 6 *ibid*, p.4.
- 7 See *Spohr Journal* 33, Winter 2006, "Louis Spohr in the Caricatures of Ludwig Emil Grimm" by Wolfram Boder, p.5.
- 8 Malibran 1860, pp.205f.
- 9 See: Louis Spohr: *Lebenserinnerungen*, Vol.II, ed. by Folker Göthel, Tutzing 1968, p.151.
- 10 See *Spohr Journal* 33, Winter 2006, "Louis Spohr in the Caricatures of Ludwig Emil Grimm" by Wolfram Boder, p.9.
- 11 Wulfhorst 1986, p.8.
- 12 U.C.Hill, letter to Louis Spohr, November 16th 1844, Landesbibliothek und Murdhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel, 4^o Ms. Hass.287.
- 13 www.mgcnyc.org, researched October 7th 2007.
- 14 www.mgcnyc.org, researched October 7th 2007.
- 15 Shanet 1975, p.491.
- 16 *The New York Times*, November 17th 1889.
- 17 Krehbiel 1892, pp.164f.
- 18 Aiken, Andrew J, and Lewis A. Proctor, *Wisconsin Men of Progress*, Milwaukee 1897, quoted from Corenthal 1991, p.67.
- 19 *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 15th 1927, quoted from Corenthal 1991, p.69.
- 20 Becker 1979, p.62.

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