



University of Music FRANZ LISZT Weimar
International LOUIS SPOHR Competition for Young
Violinists

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LOUIS SPOHR

He was the 'German Paganini', a true devil's violonist, but at the same time a dignified composer. Born in Braunschweig, Louis Spohr (1784-1859) belonged to a generation of European virtuosi such as Paganini, John Field, Bernhard Romberg, George Onslow and Ferdinand Ries. He lived through the rise, success and death of important composers like Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann. It still is not easy to locate a contemporary witness of classicism and romanticism and exactly this makes Spohr an interesting exception.

Already in obituaries his contemporaries were divided on how to assess Spohr the virtuoso as well as Spohr the composer of more than 300 compositions. It certainly did not help that Spohr's gigantic div hardly fit his 'light' muse. In 1862 the composer Johann Andreas Romberg wrote: "Although his person makes for a huge and powerful div, from which one might expect Handel-like cyclopean beats on the listener's heart, he prefers complaining and crying". His music can be compared with a river: "It flows in eternal peace and smoothness, between even, flat banks, through flowering meadows and fertile fields. It never foams against cliffs; on its shores it never surges against picturesque rocks". Although Spohr was recognised as the "patriarch of German musical composition" (Dwight's journal of music, 1854) in mid-century England, it was agreed that "Spohr remained untouched by Beethoven" (Wilhelm von Lenz, 1855).

Indeed, Spohr's music, especially his violin music which includes 15 violin concertos, belongs to a unique musical 'in-between generation' who knew Beethoven and observed the emerging romanticism, but were neither interested in the brooding "Sturm und Drang" nor in romantic escapism. Instead, Spohr used a mediating, lyrical poetic musical language: in the press of the time he was once described as a 'poet of the instrumental movement'. While that might sound conservative or even rigid to some, Spohr achieved a personal style and found his own niche in music history. This is consistent with historical observations (Deutscher Bühnenalmanach, 1860): Spohr had "a noble, crude, trivial and completely strange way of perception".

Perhaps it is exactly this world-enraptured quality that makes his music so timeless. Not to be underestimated is the fact that Spohr saw himself as a life-long educator. From 1822 onwards young violinists from all over Europe made a pilgrimage to his Kassel 'workshop' to learn at the famous Spohr 'Violin School'. Spohr's gift for education is also reflected in his compositions. Even the Leipzig cantor Moritz Hauptmann (1792-1868) discovered that Spohr's chamber music addressed the "wise" and "sensitive listener" and in this combination was "genuinely Spohr". His music is immediately understood

by the audience and wants to be understood, also 'emotionally'. Spohr, who appeared as a virtuoso on many stages around the world, comprehended his audience as a direct, communicative counterpart and not as an abstract entity or even, as Beethoven's generation, a despicable, anonymous mass. The key to the unique position of Spohr's compositions, for which no concrete place in music history has been found yet, might lie in the didactical need of musical conveyance. Perhaps one would have forgotten the music had it not been for the continuous care of violinists who, if not so often publicly, still play his music.

The LISZT UNIVERSITY of Music in Weimar specifically chose Louis Spohr as the artistic-pedagogical leading div of their international violin competition: His technical virtuosity and his mediating music are no strangers - they depend on each other. Whereas the soloist was still the focus with Paganini, Spohr had a different self-conception. His 'chamber music' way of thinking can also be experienced in his seldomly performed duos - for the jury chairman Prof. Friedemann Eichhorn "little treasures" that were selected as compulsory pieces for the first round of the age categories 2 and 3.