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978-1-108-01172-3 - Louis Spohr's Autobiography: Translated from the German

Louis Spohr

Excerpt

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My father, *Carl Heinrich Spohr*, Doctor of Medicine, afterwards Medical Councillor, was the son of a Clergyman at Woltershausen in the district of Hildesheim. He married, November 26, 1782, *Ernestine Henke*, daughter of the Clergyman of the Aegyidian church of Brunswick, and at first resided with her parents at the parsonage*). I was the eldest child of this marriage, and was born April 5, 1784. Two years later, my father was transferred as district physician to Seesen. My earliest recollections reach back to that removal; for the impression made upon me by my mother's weeping, after having taken leave of her parents, and our arrival at the simple and somewhat rustic house at Seesen, have remained with me up to the present time. I remember also the smell of the newly whitewashed walls striking me as disagreeable, and even now I still retain an uncommon acuteness and sensibility of the senses.

In Seesen were born my four brothers, and one sister. My parents were musical: my father played the flute, and my mother, a pupil of the Conductor *Schwaneberger* in Brunswick, played on the piano with great ability, and sang the Italian

*) The house is still standing, and, as Number 7, forms the corner of the Aegyidian churchyard in Monk street. For several years it has been given up to the Military musical institution, since the parish was abolished during the Westphalian times.

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bravuras of that time. As they practiced music very often in the evening, a sense and love for the art was early awakened in me. Gifted with a clear soprano voice, I at first began to sing, and already in my fourth or fifth year I was able to sing duets with my mother at our evening music. It was at this time that my father, yielding to my eagerly expressed wish, bought me a violin at the yearly fair, upon which I now played incessantly. At first I tried to pick out the melodies I had been used to sing, and was more than happy when my mother accompanied me.

Soon after, I had lessons from Herr *Riemenschneider*, and I still remember, that, after the first lesson, in which I had learned to play the *G*-sharp accord upon all four strings, in an extasy at the harmony, I hastened into the kitchen to my mother, and arpeggiated the chord to her so incessantly that she was obliged to drive me out. When I had learned the fingering of the violin from notes, I was also allowed to practise music with the others in the evening, as violinist, and there were particularly three trios by *Kalkbrenner*, for piano, flute and violin, which, after being studied, were executed in presence of our circle of friends.

About the year 1790 or 91 a French emigrant, named *Dufour*, came to Seesen. Although an amateur, only, he was an accomplished violinist and violoncellist. He settled there; and being supplied with free board by the more wealthy inhabitants, maintained himself by giving French lessons. The days on which he used to come to my parents, we always practised music, and I still remember having been moved to tears the first time I heard him play. I now gave my parents no rest until I had lessons from him.

Dufour, astonished at my rapid progress, was the first to persuade my parents to devote me entirely to music. My father, who had predestined me for the study of medicine, was from his love of music soon brought to agree to this; but he had a hard struggle with my grandfather, whose idea of a Musician was limited to that of a Tavern-fiddler who

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played to dancers. Subsequently, after I had been so early appointed *Kammermusicus**) in Brunswick, I had the satisfaction to induce my grandfather, who loved me very much, to adopt a higher opinion respecting my chosen career as a musical *artiste*.

It was while I took lessons from M. *Dufour*, that I made my first attempts at composition, but without yet having had any instruction in harmony. They consisted in duets for two violins, and I executed them with my teacher at our musical soirées; astonishing my parents with them in the highest degree. To this day, I recollect the proud feeling of being already able to appear before the friends of the house as a composer. As a reward, I received from my parents a gala dress, consisting of a red jacket with steel buttons, yellow breeches, and laced boots with tassels; a dress for which I had long prayed in vain. The duets, which my father has carefully preserved, are indeed incorrect and childish, but possess a certain form and a flowing melody.

This first brilliant success in composition, so inspired me, that from this time I devoted nearly every hour which the school allowed me, to similar attempts: I even ventured upon a little opera, the text of which I took from "*Weisse's Kinderfreund*." It may be mentioned as characteristic, that, I began with the title-page, and first of all painted it very finely with Indian ink; then followed the overture, then a chorus, then an air, and there the work came to a standstill. As I had never yet seen an opera performed, I took the model for these musical pieces from *Hiller's* operas "*Die Jagd*", and "*Lottchen am Hofe*", of which my mother had a pianoforte arrangement, and which she had often sung with me and my father. But I soon felt that I needed both knowledge and experience for such an undertaking, and I therefore set to work at other attempts. In this however, I had a hard struggle with my father, who strongly insisted that every work once begun should be completed before another was commenced; and only

*) Musician in the Ducal Orchestra, or Court Musician.

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because my father was convinced that I was unequal to so great a task, was an exception made on this occasion; but it was never allowed again. To this severity I owe my perseverance in working, and I have always recollected the paternal precept.

As my father liked to superintend the labours of his son, he allowed me to establish myself in his study, not being at all disturbed by the humming and whistling of the young composer. When I had written down anything wrong, which happened frequently enough, and was obliged to scratch it out, my father heard it at once, and would say half angrily: "Now the stupid boy is making windows again!" — for thus he designated the marks I made across the lines, in scratching out. I was very sensitive to this, and that is perhaps the reason why I acquired early the habit of writing off a clean score without erasing anything.

Since it was now determined, on the advice of *Dufour*, that I should devote myself entirely to music; *Dufour* insisted that I should be sent to Brunswick to enjoy the advantage of better lessons, particularly in theory. This could not take place till I was confirmed. According to a law strictly observed in the Dutchy of Brunswick, confirmation could not take place before the age of fourteen; in order therefore to lose no time, I was sent to my grandfather in the district of Hildesheim, where it was left to the decision of the clergyman as to when the children could be admitted to confirmation. Here, during the winter, I had lessons from my clever grandfather, both in religion, and other things; but music-lessons were not attended to, for neither my grandfather nor my uncles understood anything about it. I was therefore obliged to walk twice a week to Alefeld with my violin, to take lessons from the precentor there. Tedious as were these journeys, owing to the frequent severity of the winter weather, I was always pleased with them, chiefly, indeed, because I felt that I was above my teacher, and often brought him into difficulties by my fluent reading of the notes; and besides,

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I had not unfrequently the secret triumph of seeing him brought to a standstill.

Half way to Alefeld, stood a solitary mill. I once entered there during a heavy shower of rain, and gained the good will of the miller's wife to such a degree, that from that time I was obliged to call every day I passed by, and was treated with coffee, cakes and fruit; for which I used to improvise something upon my violin by way of thanks. I still remember having once so completely ravished her by playing *Wranitzky's* variations upon "*Du bist lieberlich*", into which all the juggles with which *Paganini* afterwards enchanted the world were introduced, that she would not let me leave her during the whole day.

Soon after returning from Woltershausen, I was sent to Brunswick, where I was received into the house of the rich gingerbread-baker *Michaelis*, as one of his own children, and treated with kindness by all the members of the family; my father had been their physician and had cured *Michaelis'* wife of a dropsy.

I commenced my musical and other studies with eagerness. I received instruction on the Violin from *Kammermusicus Kunisch*, a well grounded and amiable teacher, to whom I owe much. Less friendly was my instructor in harmony and counterpoint, an old organist named *Hartung*; and I still remember how severely he once rebuked me, when, soon after the beginning of the lessons, I showed him a composition of my own. "There is time enough for that," said he, "you must learn something first." But after some months he himself encouraged me to make trials in composition: he corrected me, however, so mercifully, and scratched out so many ideas which to me appeared sublime, that I lost all desire to show him anything further. Not long afterwards, our lessons were brought to a close by the ill health of the old man; and these were the only lessons in theory, I ever had. I was now obliged to seek for instruction in theoretical works. But the reading of good scores was of special advantage to me; these I ob-

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tained from the Theatrical library through the interest of my teacher *Kunisch*. In this manner I soon learned to write harmony correctly; and I now ventured for the first time to appear publicly in Brunswick with a composition for the violin. This took place in the School-concert of the *Katharinen-Schule*, which I attended as a *Secundamer*. These concerts were instituted by the Prefect for the practice of the School-choir; but from several members of the *Hof-Kapelle*, the Town musicians, and accomplished amateurs taking part in them, they became so important, that greater works could always be executed, such as Cantatas, Symphonies, and instrumental Concertos. From this time everything was studied very exactly, and the performances, which were held in the tolerably large saloon of the head class, soon became so celebrated, that it enabled a trifling entrance money to be charged to defray the expenses. At one of these concerts I thus appeared for the first time in my native-town, and achieved so much success that I was invited to assist at the Subscription concerts at the *Deutsches Haus*, and received the usual remuneration. This first payment which I earned as an artist made me very happy, nor have I forgotten the proud feeling with which I announced it to my parents. I now frequently played solos at the subscription concerts, and generally some of my own compositions. I was also allowed to play in the Orchestra of the Theatre for my own practice, and, thereby, became familiar with much good music.

At this time, still possessing my clear, high soprano voice, it gave me much pleasure also to join the School chorus in its perambulations through the town. The leader, who since then has become celebrated as the Bass singer, *Strohmeyer*, gave the soprano solos to me very readily, from my being able to sing them without fault at sight.

My teacher *Kunisch*, who interested himself for me in a paternal manner, now insisted that I should take lessons of the Concert-Director *Maucourt*, the best violinist of the Brunswick orchestra. My father agreed readily, although it

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was much against his grain to pay the higher charge for this instruction; and the more so, as I had been obliged to leave *Michaelis'* house from his inability to give me up a special apartment, and that it was quite impossible for me to play and compose quietly in the same room with the children of the house. A further consequence of this change of dwelling was, that my father was obliged to arrange with his former acquaintances about my having free board; this was very galling to his ambitious son. Nevertheless I was treated in a friendly way by all these people, and thus the humiliating feeling of my position was soon dissipated. I now, with another *Secundaner*, inhabited a room in the house of the organist *Bürger*; here however I could practise and compose undisturbed, for our landlord, who interested himself in my musical studies, placed his music room and pianoforte at my disposal.

With M. *Maucourt's* instruction, I progressed more and more towards becoming (for my age) an excellent solo player: and after the lapse of about a year, as my father was unable to defray the great expense of my living in Brunswick, on account of the growing up of his other children, he considered me to have made progress enough to enable me to try my luck in the world as a travelling "*Artiste*." He determined therefore to send me first to Hamburg, where he had acquaintances to whom he could give me letters of recommendation.

Accustomed to obey my father in everything, and well disposed to consider myself a shining light, I had no objection to this. If it appear hazardous in the extreme to send a boy of fourteen into the world, left entirely to himself, and trust everything to fortune, its explanation is to be found in the character and life-experience of my father. Bold and enterprising in the highest degree, he also had already emancipated himself in his sixteenth year. In order to escape punishment at school, he had run away from Hildesheim, and supported himself most precariously in Hamburg, first as a teacher of languages, and afterwards, by giving lessons in the *Büsching* Commercial school. He then attended several Universities, struggling through

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great privations by help of his enterprising spirit and unwearied activity; and, at last, without any help from home; after a most adventurous youth, succeeded in establishing himself in practice as a physician in Brunswick. He found it therefore very natural that his son should try the same course, although my mother shook her head thoughtfully at it. Scantly provided with money for the journey, but furnished with much good advice, I was sent by the mail to Hamburgh. Still, filled with the lively impression made upon me by the crowded Commercial City, and the ships, now seen for the first time, I went, full of hope and in high spirits, to Professor *Büsching*, to whom I had a letter of introduction from my father. But how soon were those hopes to be destroyed! The Professor, after he had read the letter with increasing astonishment, exclaimed: "Your father is then still, the same as ever! What madness to send a boy into the world trusting merely to good luck!" He then explained to me, that, in order to arrange a concert in Hamburgh, one must either possess a well known name, or at least, the means to bear the great expenses it would entail. But, that in summer, when all the rich people were at their country seats, such an undertaking would be quite impossible. Completely down cast by this explanation, I could not answer a single word, and was hardly able to repress my tears. I took leave in silence, and hastened to my lodging full of despair, without thinking of delivering the other letters of recommendation. Here, upon thinking over my situation, the certainty that my money would hardly suffice for a couple of days, terrified me to such a degree, that, in thought, I already saw myself in the claws of the crimps of whom my father had drawn a warning picture. I made up my mind at once, packed up my violin and other things again, sent them to Brunswick by the mail, paid my bill, and with the scanty remainder of my money, which might perhaps suffice to my subsistence, I set out on foot, on my return to Brunswick.

Some miles from the town, calmer reflection brought regret for this overhaste; but it was too late; had it not been so, I would have turned back. I said to myself that it was

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foolish not at least to have delivered the other letters first. They might perhaps have procured for me the acquaintance of some musical person who would have appreciated my talent, and have procured some information how arrangements might have been made for a Concert. To this was added the humiliating thought that my father who had been so enterprising himself, would upbraid me as childish, cowardly and thoughtless. Thus, saddened to the depth of my soul, I wandered farther, thinking continually how I might avoid the humiliation of returning to my paternal home without having effected anything whatever.

At last, the idea struck me of addressing myself to the Duke of Brunswick, to solicit from him the means to carry on my studies. I knew that the duke had earlier played the violin himself, and I therefore hoped that he would recognise my talent. When (thought I) he has heard me play but one of my concertos, my fortune is made. With newly awakened courage I now journeyed onward, and got over the rest of the road in the most cheerful disposition of mind.

Scarcely arrived in Brunswick, I concocted a petition to the Duke, in which I laid before him my whole situation, ending with the request either for aid towards improving myself, or, for a situation in the ducal orchestra. As I knew that the Duke was in the habit of walking every morning in the park of the Palace, I sought him there with my petition in my pocket, and had the good fortune to have it accepted by him. After having glanced over it and asked me some questions about my parents and former Instructors, which I fearlessly answered, he enquired who had worded the petition. "Well, who but I myself? I need no help for that," was my reply. half offended at the doubt as to my ability. The Duke smiled and said: "Well, come to the palace to-morrow at eleven; we will then speak further about your request." Who so happy as I! Punctually at eleven I presented myself before the groom of the chambers and requested to be an-

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nounced to the Duke. "And who may *Er**) be?" snarled the groom to me in unfriendly tone. "I am no *Er*. I am here by the Duke's command, and *Er* has to announce me", was my indignant reply. The groom went to announce me, and before my excitement had subsided I was introduced. My first word to the Duke was therefore, "Your Serene Highness! your servant calls me "*Er*"; I must earnestly remonstrate against that." The duke laughed aloud, and said: "Come, calm yourself; he will not do it again". Then, after having put several questions to me to which I gave the most unembarrassed answers, he said: "I have enquired about your abilities from your last teacher *Maucourt*, and am now desirous to hear you play one of your own compositions; this can take place at the next concert in the apartments of the Duchess. I will have it intimated to the director *Schwaneberger*."

In most happy mood I left the Palace, hastened to my lodging, and prepared myself for the concert in the most careful manner.

The Court concerts in the apartments of the duchess took place once a week, and were most disagreeable to the musicians of the Ducal Orchestra: for, according to the then prevailing custom, cards were played during the music. In order not to be disturbed, the Duchess had ordered the orchestra, always to play *piano*. The leader therefore left out the trumpets and kettle drums, and insisted strongly that no *forte* should be played in its full strength. As this was not always to be avoided in Symphonies, however softly the band might play, the Duchess ordered a thick carpet to be spread out under the orchestra, in order to deaden the sound. One heard therefore the words "I play", "I stand" and so forth, much louder than the music.

However, the evening on which I played there for the first time, the card tables and carpet had disappeared; the

*) *Er*, or he, used in this mode of address, is a contemptuous style of expression in the German language, which has its equivalent only in the English word *fellow*, used in a rude sense.