**SPOHR, LUDWIG** (1784-1859), German composer and violin­ist, was born at Brunswick on the 25th of April 1784. He spent his childhood at Seesen, where in 1789 he began to study the violin, and at six years old was able to take part in chamber-music. He had a few lessons in composition, but, as he himself tells us, he learnt more from studying the scores of Mozart. After playing a concerto of his own at a school concert with marked success, he was placed under Maucourt, the leader of the duke’s band; and in 1798 he started on an artistic tour. This proved a failure; but on his return to Brunswick the duke gave him an appointment in his band, and provided for his future education under Franz Eck, with whom he visited St Petersburg and other European capitals. His first violin concerto was printed in 1803. In that year Spohr returned to Brunswick and resumed his place in the duke’s band. A visit to Paris was prevented by the loss of his favourite violin—a magnificent Guarnerius, presented to him in Russia. After a series of concerts in Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, and other German towns, his reputation gained for him in 1805 the appoint­ment of leading violinist to the duke of Gotha. Soon after this he married his first wife, Dorette Scheidler, a celebrated harpist. At Gotha he composed his first opera, *Die Prüfung,* but did not succeed in producing it.. *Alruna* was equally unfortunate, though Goethe approved of it at a trial rehearsal at Weimar in 1808. In this year Spohr, hearing that Talma was performing at Erfurt before Napoleon’s Congress of Princes, and failing to obtain admission to the theatre, bribed a horn-player to send him as his deputy; and, though he had never touched a horn in his life, he learned in a single day to play it well enough to pass muster in the evening and so to get a good view of Napoleon and the princes in a pocket mirror on his desk. Spohr’s third opera, *Der Zweikampf mit der Geliebten,* written in 1809, was successfully performed at Hamburg next year. In 1811 he produced his (first) *Symphony in E flat,* and in 1812 composed his first oratorio, *Das jüngste Gericht.@@1* In writing this work he felt hampered by lack of skill in counter-point; so with characteristic diligence he mastered the contents of Marpurg’s *Abhandlung von der Fuge.*

In 1812 Spohr visited Vienna, and was induced to accept the leadership of the orchestra at the Theater an der Wien. He then began his dramatic masterpiece, *Faust,* which he completed in 1813, though it was not performed until five years later. His strength and inventiveness as a composer were now fully developed, and enabled him to produce large works with astonish­ing rapidity. He resigned his appointment at Vienna in 1815, and soon afterwards made a tour in Italy, where he per­formed his eighth and finest violin concerto, the *Scena cantante nello stilo drammatico.* The leading Italian critics called him “ the finest singer on the violin that had ever been heard.” On Spohr’s return to Germany in 1817 he was appointed con­ductor of the opera at Frankfort; and there in 1818 he first produced his *Faust.* It was followed by *Zemire und Azor,* which, though by no means as fine as *Faust,* soon attained a much greater popularity. *Faust* suffered from its libretto, which is on quite a different plot from Goethe’s poem.

Spohr first visited England in 1820, and on the 6th of March played his *Scena cantante* with great success in London at the first Philharmonic concert. At the third he produced a new symphony *(No. 2 in D minor)* and, instead of having it led by the first violinist and a *maestro al cembalo,* conducted it himself with a bâton; a great innovation in London at the time. Spohr had a triumphant success both as composer and as virtuoso; and he on his side was delighted with the Philharmonic orchestra. At his farewell concert in London Mme Spohr played on the harp for the last time. The constrained attitudes of harp-playing were bad for her health; so in later concerts she played the pianoforte in duets with violin which her husband produced with his usual prompt facility. After a transitory visit to Paris, Spohr returned to Germany and settled for a time in Dresden, where German and Italian opera were flourishing side by side under the direction of Weber and Morlacchi. Spohr could

not appreciate Weber’s genius; nevertheless Weber recommended him strongly to the elector of Hesse Cassel as Kapellmeister. Spohr entered upon his duties at Cassel on the 1st of January 1822, and soon afterwards began his sixth opera, *Jessonda,* which he produced in 1823. This work—which he himself re­garded as one of his best—marks an important epoch in his operatic career. It was his first opera on Gluck’s lines, *i.e.* with accompanied recitative throughout in place of secco-recitative or spoken dialogue; and it was produced in the same year as Weber’s *Euryanthe,* a work marked by the same departure from German custom.

Spohr’s resources at Cassel enabled him to produce his new works on a grander scale and with more perfect detail than he could have attained in a less well-endowed post; and he never failed to use these privileges to the advantage of other meri­torious composers, though as a critic he was very difficult to please. Soon after his instalment Mendelssohn, then a boy of thirteen, visited Cassel; notwithstanding the disparity of their years, a firm friendship sprang up between the two, which ceased only with Mendelssohn’s death in 1847. Spohr’s next three operas, *Der Berggeist* (1825), *Pietro von Abano* (1827) and *Der Alchymist* (1830), attained only fair temporary success. But at the Rhenish musical festival held at Düsseldorf in 1826, his oratorio *Die letzten Dinge* met with so enthusiastic a reception that it was repeated a few days later in aid of the Greek Insur­gents, and became the most famous of his sacred compositions. It is known in English as *The Last Judgment.* In 1831 Spohr summed up another aspect of his career by publishing his *Violin School,* an admirable book for advanced students, which stands to the violin much as the combination of Cramer’s *Studies* with Clementi’s *Gradus* stands to the pianoforte. The year 1834 was saddened by the death of Spohr’s wife. In 1836 he married again. During 1833 he had been working at an oratorio—*Des Heilands letzte Stunden,* known in English as *Calvary* or *The Crucifixion—*which was performed at Cassel on Good Friday 1835, and sung in English at the Norwich Festival of 1839 under Spohr’s own direction, with an effect which he afterwards always spoke of as the greatest triumph of his life. For the Norwich Festival of 1842 he composed *The Fall of Babylon,* which also was a perfect success, though the elector of Hesse- Cassel, unmoved by a petition from England almost amounting to a diplomatic representation, refused Spohr leave of absence to conduct it. His last opera, *Die Kreuzfahrer,* was produced at Cassel in 1845. Of his nine symphonies the finest, *Die Weihe der Töne,* was produced in 1832. His compositions for the violin include concertos, quartetts, duets, and other con­certed pieces and solos, and among these a high place is taken by four double quartetts, *(i.e.* octets for two antiphonal string­quartet groups), an art-form of his own invention. He was, indeed, keenly interested in experiments, notwithstanding his attachment to classical form; and the care with which he pro­duced Wagner’s *Fliegender Holländer* and *Tannhäuser* at Cassel in 1842 and 1853, in spite of the elector’s opposition, shows that his failure to understand Beethoven lay deeper than pedantry. Spohr retained his appointment until 1857, when, very much against his wish, he was pensioned off. In the same year he broke his arm, but he was able to conduct *Jessonda* at Prague in 1858. This, however, was his last effort. He died at Cassel on the 16th of October 1859.

Spohr’s *Selbstbiographie* is a delightful document, revealing a character the generosity of which was conspicuous through all its complacent intellectual foibles. He was a born taste-maker, for he mastered the technique of his art safely and then applied his mastery to the expression of exactly those modes of thought which surprise no one who believes that each art-problem has one answer and that the critics know it. But he had a very genuine melodic invention, and his sense of beauty was such as even the all-pervading mannerisms of his otiose chromatic style could not quite destroy. He tried every experiment the copy-book optimism of his age could suggest; the subjects of his operas are all that is romantic and necromantic; he wrote almost as much “ programme-music ” as Berlioz; he invented.

@@@1 Not to be confused with *The Last Judgment.*