

SPOHR ON RECORD - A BICENTENARY SURVEY

by Keith Warsop

Spohr enthusiasts looked forward to 1984 with high expectations of some significant additions to the composer's recorded repertoire. In the event the initial reaction is one of disappointment - nothing from the operas; no violin concertos; none of the better symphonies apart from the duplication of No.3; no Lieder; none of the string quartets and quintets; no piano trios; no overtures in C minor, Macbeth, Faust, Pietro von Abano or The Alchymist.

On second thoughts a more balanced view must be taken. At long last the much-awaited recording of Die letzten Dinge has arrived; the complete Double-quartets have been recorded and await issue at the time of writing; a complete set of the Clarinet Concertos performed by top rank artists has just become available and in Germany, at least, a couple of string quartets and a string quintet are scheduled.

We regard the absence of Spohr's best violin concertos as the biggest setback of the year. Performances of these would do far more for his reputation than any amount of symphonies, yet the virtuosi of today shun them almost completely. Only the much-recorded Gesangszene keeps appearing and the latest, on ORFEO S046831, is an arrangement for flute and orchestra authorised by the composer. The soloist is Andras Adoryan with the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Stuttgart conducted by David Shallon (coupling is a flute arrangement of Mendelssohn's E minor violin concerto) and well though the work is played and recorded it is no substitute for

the violin version which still lacks a thoroughly recommendable up-to-date recording by an outstanding violinist. Perhaps the American Oscar Shumsky, who recently declared his love for Spohr's music in a radio interview, will fill the void.

Some members of the Society may have acquired the recording of the Seventh Violin Concerto issued privately by the Kassel Stadtparkasse two or three years ago. However, we have to say that while we find this version, recorded at a public concert, to be serviceable it is rather dully projected and the soloist, Christiane Edinger, gravely at fault in attempting to convert a section of the finale into a pseudo-cadenza by subjecting the tempo to amazing contortions. We have Spohr's own warning, in his prefatory remarks to the Ninth Concerto, against such procedures.

Our own advice to violinists looking for repertoire would be to consider the Fifth and Sixth Concertos. From the point of view of financial economy, the latter work does not require trumpets, trombones or timpani and therefore, in these days of penny-watching by concert promoters, should have attractions apart from its musical ones. Perhaps the young British violinist Nigel Kennedy, who has already appeared in a broadcast performance of the Potpourri on Irish Melodies, might be induced to take up the work.

Moving to symphonies we note that the German firm of Orfeo are to issue a coupling of two of them, conducted by Karl Anton Rickenbacher. Unfortunately they would seem to have been badly advised for the works which they have chosen turn out to be the much-abused Historical Symphony and the Ninth Symphony (The Seasons), which has also been subjected to some hard words from Spohr experts.

It seems unbelievable that in Spohr's bicentenary year the three outstanding symphonies, the Second, Fourth and Fifth, should have been absent from recording schedules and the BBC anniversary programmes. Instead the Eighth was chosen to be broadcast while later the Historical was also heard. Admittedly the BBC did broadcast the Second a couple of years ago and also the Seventh (another acknowledged weaker work) leaving us with the following list of broadcast and recorded symphonies over the past few years: Second, Third, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth and Ninth. We think that a recording of the Fourth using the latest technology and performed by a front-line orchestra would create a sensational effect and cannot see why programme and recording producers overlook the obvious.

The Ninth Symphony did find one major advocate in the late Bernard Herrmann (the Hollywood composer who also conducted a stunning record of Raff's Lenore Symphony) who especially enthused about the beauties of the slow movement. In view of this we cannot altogether grieve at the thought of it appearing on record at last but think it was hardly a major priority.

Neither was the latest recording of the Third Symphony on Schwann VMS1620 (Radio Symphony Orchestra of Berlin conducted by Gerd Albrecht, coupled with the Jessonda overture)! The new version is a decided advance on the performance on Bärenreiter RBM3035 but both interpretations come to grief over the Larghetto. Whereas Sulyok races through it and turns it into a brief intermezzo, Albrecht goes to the opposite extreme and imbues it with the intense feeling of a great romantic adagio. The timings of the two performances are completely incompatible for while Sulyok takes just on four minutes, Albrecht is almost three times as slow with just over 11 minutes! The ideal tempo was demonstrated by Carl Garaguly in a broadcast several years ago - round about eight minutes. Sulyok is also cavalier with the dynamics and tempo markings throughout the

work and Albrecht makes far more of the first movement while his lighter touch gives the finale a more Spohr-like flavour in a movement in which the composer deserts his characteristic style for an approach which is under the shadow of Beethoven. Albrecht, however, must give way on the question of repeats, especially in the scherzo where he omits the second ones in both the scherzo proper and the trio. Sulyok repeats everything marked and in the finale this gives us 13 bars of Spohr which would not otherwise be heard, the first-time lead into the exposition repeat. Albrecht, in line with his more quicksilver view of this movement and his general policy over repeats, omits this.

The new complete recording of the four Clarinet Concertos is not to hand at the time of writing (soloist Karl Leister) but we welcome a modern recording of the Third Concerto to the catalogues and are glad that German clarinets are now challenging the British monopoly in these works. It is a pity that the projected complete recording on Argo (soloist Antony Pay) did not get beyond the first two concertos before the takeover of the company brought it to an end, for the Pay must be judged one of the outstanding Spohr records. However, we are pleased that Leister has entered the lists, for the more recordings of these lovely works the better. A new version of the Fourth is not to be sniffed at either, for the beautiful Thea King performance is not blessed with the finest recording of its orchestral contribution.

Turning to chamber music, the most important releases are the four Double-quartets due from Hyperion and recorded with financial aid from the Spohr Society of Great Britain. The works are performed by the Chamber Ensemble of the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields and this group have already toured Britain, the United States and Europe, earning golden reviews both for their interpretations and the double-quartets themselves. Many of our members will have got to know the Third on the Decca record featuring the Vienna Octet while the First has been recorded on three occasions before. But the Second and Fourth are new to the catalogue and we think that the finale of the Second has the sort of melodic quality that could make it an ideal "signature tune" for a radio or television programme. The Fourth is one of the finest of Spohr's late works and initiates a period of recovery after the rather laboured inspiration of preceding years. Another late work that can now be studied - and enjoyed - on record is the Septet and we have no hesitation in declaring that the version which appeared a year or so back by the Nash Ensemble on CRD1099 (coupling is the Piano and Wind Quintet) joins the Antony Pay record as one of the outstanding Spohr issues. What, for one listener at least, was a revelation was the inclusion of the exposition repeats in both the Septet and Quintet.

It is generally thought that, after Beethoven, composers such as Spohr, Mendelssohn and Schumann stuck their exposition repeat signs in out of custom, idleness or pedantry. But Spohr's practice is not uniform; for instance the Third Symphony does not have repeats in the first movement, though they are there in the finale. In the Piano and Wind Quintet we can immediately see - and hear - the justification for their use. Many commentators have remarked on the passages in 'Clementi thirds' which start at bar 61 and do not seem to have any thematic function but to be mindless virtuosity. Well, when the repeat comes round, listen for the little figure on the piano in bars 12-16; this time it seems like a reminiscence of the passage work (even though not in thirds). As it is omitted from the recapitulation it would be heard only the once if the repeat were not taken. So we recommend the Nash both for the repeats and for the quality of their interpretation.

For a long time the string quartets have been unobtainable on record but we can now report that one is in production containing the quartets

in E flat, Op.29/1, and in D minor, Op.74/3, played by the young Sonare Quartet of Frankfurt and to be issued by Musikproduktion Dabringhaus und Grimm of Detmold (MD-GG1144). A further record of the quartet in B flat, Op.74/2, coupled with a quartet by Spohr's pupil Norbert Burgmüller is planned. A first recording of the Third String Quintet in B minor, Op.69, should be available soon on Concerto Bayreuth 16002. The coupling will be quintet movements by Mozart in B flat and A minor, both previously unrecorded. The performers are from the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra and the project is a co-production with Bavarian Radio.

Next, the choral music and the most important issue is undoubtedly 'Die letzten Dinge'. Despite what the sleeve and certain record reviewers would have us believe the work was NOT known as the Apocalypse oratorio in Britain but as 'The Last Judgement'! As such, of course, the work is legendary; the sort of thing our Victorian ancestors preferred to all this modern rot by Wagner and Berlioz! Perhaps the conductor, Siegfried Heinrich (with the Frankfurt Symphony Orchestra, the Hersfeld Festival Choir and the Frankfurt and Marburg Concert Choir) has attempted to point up Spohr's Wagnerian foreloomings too strongly, but the work comes over as rather staid and without the dramatic excitement which live performances in this country have produced in recent years. One critic has compared the interpretation to Klemperer and, whatever benefits that confers, it does mean funereal tempi. Nevertheless the many lyrical beauties of Spohr's score are fully brought out and this version is not to be sneered at. If only the big choruses had a greater sense of drama. Meanwhile we have to agree to some extent with the critic and Weber expert John Warrack in the Gramophone magazine where he said that Spohr had suppressed much of the dramatic sense he shows in his operas in the search for a more devotional style. However we doubt very much that an oratorio would have stood much of a chance in that era if it had been merely sublimated opera and we rate the work much higher than Mr. Warrack does. Perhaps the coming recording of it on the Orfeo label will open his ears.

When the appearance of nearly anything by Spohr on record must be counted esoteric it hardly suits to call a disc of the Mass in C such but it is not the sort of work we would normally think of as Spohr territory. Aurophon AU11025 offers the Mass coupled with the three Psalms, Op.85, and it turns out to have many Spohrian features, despite the avowed intent of emulating the a capella style of the Palestrina period. The use of a double choir is imaginative and effective, as is only to be expected from the inventor of the double-quartets, and the Spohr lyricism gradually seeps into the music after the severe opening Kyrie. Altogether an unusual and inspired work well worth searching out. The Psalms are in Spohr's usual vocal style of the oratorios with the occasional hint of Wagnerian chorales - and if the Freiburg choir is not of international class it is certainly of good provincial standard.