

SPOHR'S DOUBLE-QUARTETS - An Introductory Note

by Maurice Powell

I am sure that many of us are eagerly awaiting the appearance of the first of the two records devoted to Spohr's four Double-quartets, recorded this year by the Academy of St.Martin-in-the-Fields Chamber Ensemble for HYPERION.

Double-quartets 1 and 2, Op.68 and Op.77, were recorded at the Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Church in North London on Sunday the 8th and Monday the 9th of January. The 3rd and 4th Double-quartets, Op.87 and Op.136, were recorded on Friday the 15th and Saturday the 16th of June at St.Barnabas Church, Woodside Park, North London. The producer for the project was Andrew Keener, who, as you may know, compiles the News and Views feature in the Gramophone magazine. As anticipated, the sessions went very well, for the Ensemble has all four works in its repertoire, and shares its player-manager Malcolm Latchem's enthusiasm for Spohr's music.

HYPERION is a small and enlightened record company that already has a reputation for producing quality discs of interesting, unusual and often neglected music.

The Academy of St.Martin-in-the-Fields Chamber Ensemble was created in 1967 from the internationally renowned Academy of St.Martin-in-the-Fields orchestra. The Ensemble usually appears as a string octet and specialises in performing chamber music for larger combinations of instruments, Quintets to Octets. In recent years, the Ensemble has toured in Germany several times, in Spain, Norway, Yugoslavia, Switzerland and the U.S.A..

In September 1983 they recorded Op.77 for Swiss radio, and shortly afterwards gave the work in a concert before an enthusiastic audience in Ascona. In October 1983 the Ensemble played the work again in London at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. In December they performed both Op.77 and Op.136 during a German tour which included Kassel.

So far this bicentenary year, they have travelled to America and gave Op.136 at the Carnegie Hall on April 2nd as part of a bicentenary concert. London audiences had the opportunity to hear Op.136 at the QEH later in April; in May the Ensemble toured through France and Italy with Op.68 and Op.77. Probably not since Spohr's day has his music been so extensively - and brilliantly - played around Europe, and certainly not by a world-class Ensemble which has acquired a genuine love for the music and feeling for its style.

In his Autobiography Spohr tells us that it was Andreas Romberg who suggested the idea of a Double-quartet "the last time we played together before he died". The older composer may even have shown Spohr some sketches for an unfinished work of his own. Romberg (1767-1821), Spohr's successor at Gotha, violinist, and a highly regarded composer of concertos, chamber music and the popular cantata, 'The Lay of the Bell', had earlier criticised Spohr's Op.15 quartets of 1808. "They are far behind your orchestral works". Spohr subsequently dedicated his first great quartets, Op.29, to Romberg with the hope that they "would do!".

It is hardly surprising that Spohr was enthusiastic for Romberg's idea, for the Double-quartet format was ideal for his mature style of 'virtuoso' chamber music. Furthermore, the possibilities for a subtle interplay between two groups had already been explored by Spohr in his 1820 Mass, Op.54, for soloists and double choir. He would further experiment with idea in a more picturesque way in 1840 with the 7th Symphony, Op.121 for double orchestra, 'Irdisches und Göttliches im Menschenleben'. Spohr firmly believed he had created a new genre, yet his Double-quartets remain almost isolated examples. Again, in his Autobiography, he was at pains to point out the essential difference between his works and the popular, but orchestrally conceived Octet by Mendelssohn.

The first Double-quartet was written during March and April 1823 and was published as Op.65 two years later. Spohr's London friend, the organist,

composer and conductor of the London Philharmonic Society concerts, Sir George Smart, was present at a performance of the work whilst on a visit to Kassel in November 1825, and wrote in his Journal: "The quartet took 28 minutes . . . . . The effect was good. Spohr played beautifully. It is very difficult for the four principal instruments". He also noted the seating arrangements: two separate groups, the first violin and cello in each group facing each other. Spohr was delighted with the reception given to his first double-quartet and flattered when a young composer, Louis Pape, later Hofkomponist at Oldenburg, sent him a double-quartet of his own.

The second double-quartet was written in December 1827, and Spohr made a conscious effort to treat the two quartets more equally. Although there are dazzling solo passages particularly in the opening Allegro vivace and the Finale, the overall style is less brilliant. This is music that needs no analysis to support it. It would be difficult to resist the warm, rich melodiousness of the first movement; the rather severe '18th Century' Menuetto with its melting trio, a duet for violin and viola; the elegant Larghetto con moto with its striking pizzicato passages for the second quartet, or the witty Finale's breathless verve, one of Spohr's jauntiest inspirations.

It was probably the grave and beautiful third double-quartet, Op.87, (1832-33), that Sterndale Bennett heard in Kassel in 1842. "I have never heard such playing in my life", he wrote. "He (Spohr) is nearly 60 years old, but has the greatest energy". In a letter to a colleague in June 1833, Spohr's friend Moritz Hauptmann recalled hearing the "new and beautiful" 3rd Double-quartet at a Winter meeting of Spohr's 'Kränzchen' (regular music circle), where many of the composer's quartets and trios were first 'tried out'.

The little-known fourth double-quartet, Op.136; (April-May 1847), is arguably his most successful work in the genre, for he achieves a quite remarkable intensity of expression with part-writing of great subtlety.