

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON CLIVE BROWN'S BOOK

by Keith Warsop

Dr. Brown's critical biography of Spohr must not only stand as the definitive work on the composer in English for a long time; it also has the virtue of stimulating one's own ideas about Spohr's music. No doubt this is partly because Dr. Brown could have developed some of his lines of thought to fill far more than the allocated 364 pages if only he had the extra space available.

What follows, then, is not a review of "Louis Spohr: a critical biography". Instead it offers one reader's further exploration of some of the ideas planted by Dr. Brown. He mentions the finale of the Second Double Quartet as bringing to mind Smetana and Dvorak. As a string player in Bohemia in the 1850s and 1860s Dvorak must have come to know quite a lot of Spohr's music as well as witnessing the ageing master's final triumph in Prague in July, 1858. But there are also some interesting points in common between the composers, even though idiom could in no way be said to be heavily indebted to Spohr. First, there is their interest in juggling around with the constituents of sonata form while basically remaining faithful to its basic idea. In the finale of Spohr's Sextet, Op. 140 there are interlocking scherzo and finale sections so that the movement is really two-in-one. Similarly, Dvorak adopts such a procedure in the finale of his Piano Quartet in D, Op. 23. Then there are Dvorak's variants of sonata form in the opening movement of his Eighth Symphony which bear some resemblance to Spohr's habit of recalling a slow introduction during the main body of a movement. A further link is provided by the opening of both the composers' second symphonies. Both open with an introduction in the main tempo of the movement before reaching the first subject material proper and this introductory matter also plays a role during the further course of events. And finally, while Dvorak wrote far more piano music than Spohr, neither composer is famous for the quality of his keyboard writing.

Dr. Brown includes some detailed analyses of Spohr's best violin concertos. Taking Spohr's concertos as a whole (including those for clarinet as well as the concertantes for two instruments) one could trace the decline of the full-scale orchestral exposition as exemplified in Mozart and Beethoven to its disappearance in Mendelssohn's First Piano Concerto. In line with this proposition Spohr's First Violin Concerto of 1802-03 begins with a fully worked out orchestral introduction while by the time of the Quartet Concerto in 1845 this is reduced to only a couple of bars of drum taps. All very neat and tidy until we look at some of Spohr's other early concertos and find the pattern broken. For instance the Tenth Violin Concerto (1810) starts with a slow introduction for orchestra alone and then the solo violin enters at the start of the allegro; both the First Clarinet Concerto (1808-09) and the Eleventh Violin Concerto (1825) have the slow introduction followed by what appears to be the start of a full-scale orchestral exposition. But no sooner has the first subject appeared than the soloist makes his entry. But in the Fourth Clarinet Concerto (1829) we are back to the traditional full orchestral exposition of material. So the question is raised (but, alas, unanswered): how did Spohr decide on the plan for his concerto first movements?

It is accepted by Spohr scholars and critics that his later works show a decline in sustained inspiration and there is a lot of self-repetition but even in successful late works Spohr's style is noticeably different in one respect from his earlier works dating from Gotha and Vienna.

Or not so much different, for in many areas, especially formally, there are similarities, as less varied, as if the composer had determined on eliminating from his style anything that might resemble his great predecessors. In such works as the Nonet and Octet, alongside Spohr's own special attractions, there are moments which come from the common stock as used by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven; by the time of the piano trios and the Septet nearly everything seems to come from Spohr's own personal stock. This, of course, places a far greater strain on the quality and originality of invention. Where it flags Spohr falls back on tried and trusted material and so we get the feeling of jaded reminiscence. If, instead, he had used the small change of composers in general no one would have noticed, just as they do not in the classic masters. But when Spohr is working at high level - as in the Sextet and Fourth Double Quartet - the works lose nothing in comparison with his earlier compositions.

Dr. Brown provides a thorough discussion of Spohr's much-maligned oratorios and successfully explains why they were received with such adulation in their day. As 'The Last Judgement' and 'Calvary' are now available on record and the BBC broadcast a first-rate performance of 'The Fall of Babylon' last Christmas it is possible to judge them in full orchestral dress at long last as well as test Dr. Brown's opinion against our own ears. He makes high claims for 'Calvary' and rightly so. It seems here as if all Spohr's personal stylistic mannerisms fit the subject matter so well that they serve to enhance it. The mixture of the dreamy melancholy and the noble commented on by Dr. Brown in his reviews of the many contemporary criticisms are completely at home and justify his view that 'Calvary' can bear comparison with Mendelssohn's oratorios as well as being the outstanding 19th Century setting of the Passion.

What is also clear now that we can hear so many of Spohr's major works is that his technical mastery was on the highest level. The smart jibes against Spohr's "pseudo fugues" in Tovey's essays and Hauptmann's letters do not stand up at all against the music as actually heard. Mendelssohn's opinion that Spohr was the best composer of fugues of the day is far nearer the mark.