

## REFLECTIONS OF A MODERN SPOHR VIRTUOSO

by Philip Scowcroft

Many people, and not just the members of the Spohr Society, know clarinettist John Denman as one of the foremost, if not the outstanding, living protagonists of Spohr's music. A visit by him to give a recital in the Doncaster Museum lunchtime concert series on 16 July 1986 - which, for once in a while and for all its interesting content, included no Spohr - enabled me over a few beers in a local hostelry afterwards to have a few words with him about his recent work for Spohr and his view of the composer. Although these were delivered off the cuff I hope that these may be of interest to readers.

It was during the 1970s that I first became aware of John's abilities as a performer and of his enthusiasm for Spohr's clarinet music. Four times between 1972 and 1976 he gave lunch-hour concerts in the Doncaster Museum series, always at times when Sadlers Wells Opera, or English National Opera as it was later styled, were touring the North of England. On three of these four occasions he included music by Spohr: the Potpourri on Themes by Winter, Opus 80 (with piano rather than the original orchestra, but the first English performance of the piece), the Fantasy on Themes by Danzi, Opus 81 (with a string quartet drawn from the E.N.O. Orchestra) and the Variations from Opus 34 in their clarinet/piano transcription. At about the same time he also recorded the Second Concerto for radio and gramophone.

For several years now John has lived in Tucson, Arizona, and has widened his musical horizons, though sadly it means that in England we now hear him but rarely. Spohr is still very much a part of those horizons. The Winter Potpourri has been recorded for Concert Artist/Fidelio and is to be issued on cassette this year both in America and Britain, coupled with the Norbert Burgmüller Duo and music by Saint-Saens and Bozza. In June 1986 he and his wife Paula Fan, who nowadays always accompanies him on the piano, played the Potpourri on the cruise liner Vistafjord; as there were several Germans on the vessel he needed a German interpreter for the introductions and by a happy chance secured the delighted services of a gentleman from - Kassel!

In recent years John has become particularly associated with the International Clarinet Congress. 1982, when it was held in Denver, Colorado, was a notable Spohr year. He gave a masterclass on the Spohr clarinet music; in this two young American clarinettists rehearsed the Third and Fourth Concertos. John himself played the Second Concerto with the Colorado Philharmonic, the score used being the one he had found at the Royal Academy of Music years before and subsequently edited. He then donated this score to the I.C.C., for publication, the proceeds to go to a fund providing prize money for young competitors. (By a happy coincidence Sarah Seideman from Tucson, 17 years old, a Denman pupil and at that time a semi-finalist in the 1986 I.C.C. competition, appeared with him in the Doncaster concert of July 1986).

During January 1984 he recorded the Third Concerto with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra under Gunther Herbig in Manchester, but arguably his most exciting, certainly his most interesting, work for Spohr has been in China (I had the impression that this gave him most satisfaction). In 1981 he and Paula, who is of Chinese extraction, were contacted by the Chinese Ministry of Culture. At that time China was just emerging from the Cultural Revolution and was anxious to hear Western music. John sent various tapes, including one of the Spohr Second Concerto and following this was invited to teach at the Peking Conservatory for a month, during which time he gave various masterclasses and played the Second Concerto with the Central Philharmonic Orchestra. He made the acquaintance of Ho Fu Xing, principal clarinet of the C.P.O. and taught his son the First Concerto, which he has played. Another young Chinese clarinettist, Yang Bin Wey, then barely 18 years old, learned the Second Concerto and played it in some of the orchestral rehearsals leading up to John's performance of it; in so doing he played all the high notes in the original score, as John himself does, but which have not always been essayed in performances since Hermstedt's day. China would appear to be fertile soil for Spohr, not least, I suspect, because the Chinese musical public has fewer preconceptions than our own.

John's brilliant, incisive, absolutely secure playing is well suited to Spohr's brilliant, direct invention. He loves the Spohr clarinet music paradoxically because much of it seems to him the product of a violinist-composer. Violin music has always been special for him; from an early age he enjoyed hearing Heifetz, another brilliant practitioner. He indeed learnt violin (and piano) and several of his family, including his son Mark, now with the BBC Philharmonic, are violinists. He considers that the four concertos for clarinet would go just as well as violin concertos and Spohr himself apparently considered setting the Winter Potpourri which as we have seen is a Denman favourite. (He does admit that the obbligato in the Six German Songs, Opus 103, is "true" clarinet music). For clarinettists intending to play Spohr's concertos he insists that the best study is to listen to and try to emulate Heifetz (he of course once recorded the Eighth Violin Concerto) and other violinists - those who are capable of it - when they play Spohr and other music of his period. He recalled Spohr himself saying in the Autobiography that his slow movements were always too fast in performance, the Allegros too slow. By and large this criticism is still true because too many musicians lack the control for the slow movements and the technique for the faster ones. He does not see Spohr as a particularly forward-looking composer, at least not in the clarinet works, though he did develop the form of the clarinet concertos over the four examples he produced. The First Concerto is very much in the style of the younger Stamitz (Karl) and other contemporary Mannheimers. Operatic influence is there, of course, and is stronger in the Second Concerto. The Third's slow movement he finds strongly reminiscent of the great Mozart Concerto and Quintet in the structure of its opening idea. And the slow movement of the Fourth Concerto with its three opening double chords surely has masonic connections (Spohr and Hermstedt were both Masons). All four are immensely rewarding to play, despite their difficulty, not least for orchestra - the orchestral clarinet parts at least are formidable for all but the best players.

John tells me that in the United States he is known as the "Spohr Bore". He would retort with characteristic vigour that his clarinettist colleagues do not play Spohr because they cannot. "It's wonderful music if you can play it, but you must give it all you've got". He certainly does just that - how marvellous that in him Hermstedt lives again!