

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT SPOHR'S STRING QUARTETS

by Christopher Tutt

Thanks to the Academy of St.Martin-in-the-Fields Chamber Ensemble we can now hear all four of Spohr's Double String Quartets in excellent recorded performances. The vigour of their playing helps to bring out for me that these works have real strength and passion in them and are not just a long-winded form of rather pallid light music as some commentators in the past have suggested. But what of the 36 String Quartets that Spohr composed over a span of fifty years? So far we have available on record only three of these on 2 discs and neither disc is from a major company. Quartet in E flat, Op.29/1, is on both discs, coupled with the D minor, Op.74/3, by the Sonare Quartet (MD + G G1144), and with the D major, Op.15/2, by the Amati Quartet (Jecklin-Disco 593). The Sonare have also recorded the Quartet in B flat, Op.74/2, recently and this should be available soon.

I must confess to being rather disappointed by the discs we have so far of Spohr string quartets. Have they been neglected up to now because they are, in fact, inferior works compared to, say, the Nonet or the Octet? But, until recently, the Double Quartets, with the exception of No.1 in D minor, were similarly neglected. As with most of Spohr's music, the quality of the performance is crucial and many of the quartets do provide considerable difficulties for players. It is not surprising that the most convincing performance on record is that of the D major, Op.15/2; this poses fewer problems of technique and is closer than the others to classical models.

Op.29/1 is regarded by commentators as a more masterly, mature work and in the score it certainly looks good. Both recorded performances make the first movement make the first movement sound rather bland and give a scrambled untidy effect in parts of the finale. The first movement, however, appears in the score to be a superbly constructed, fluid movement with masterly transitions between sections; there are considerable dynamic contrasts, pianissimo passages, sudden crescendos, strong accents and a well prepared fortissimo outburst in the middle of the development. But these contrasts are not particularly obvious in the recorded performances; in particular the pianissimo entrance of the second subject in a new key, which should be a moment of pure delight, fails to make much impression here. In the finale the main difficulty seems to be with the second subject which is quite unlike anything in the quartets of the classical masters. As in many of Spohr's chamber works there is a trill and cadence towards the end of this section. This is not managed smoothly in either performance, but it is not clear to me whether it is the fault of the players or a defect in Spohr's construction of the movement. Certainly I feel that a similar insertion of a trill in the finale of the Octet, Op.32, seems a weak spot in what is otherwise a delightful movement. I find that such trills tend to be more obtrusive in finales than in first movements. Nevertheless I hope very much that some time the major quartets will take up this work and bring out its full strength and beauty.

The other quartet available on record is the D minor, Op.74/3. This is generally a good performance by the Sonare which brings out particularly the power of the Scherzo, though the Finale is not taken as energetically as the marking 'Presto' would seem to demand. The first movement does contain some conventional passage work, but it is

not confined to the first violin and there are some strong effects. I do not think that the use of conventional phrases and gestures is necessarily a bad thing in itself; such phrases and gestures are found in the works of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. What matters is how effectively they are used as part of a coherent, meaningful structure. In this Spohr had varying degrees of success and it is worth considering Moritz Hauptmann's words about 'Calvary': "Spohr surpasses his fellow-composers in the finish of his work as a whole; so true and genuine is his artistic instinct, that he will not tolerate a passage unless it blends harmoniously with the whole - there are no breaks anywhere. If one hears the numbers in detached fragments, as one does at early rehearsals, many of them seem poor in thought and invention, but when they are all welded together into a whole, one sees the appropriateness of each part."

The Quartet in B flat, Op.74/2, which is coming out on disc, should be of considerable interest. Like the three works already available it is by no means a 'solo' quartet; in fact it is the best of them for sharing out the thematic material between the instruments. It has four movements, but in place of a scherzo or minuet it has an Allegro con Variazioni in 2/4. Typical of the genial interplay of instruments in the first movement is this passage:

The first system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for Violin I, marked [violin I], and features a melodic line with a dynamic marking of *p*. The middle staff is for Violin II, marked [violin II], and includes a *pizz* (pizzicato) section. The bottom staff is for the Cello/Double Bass, marked arco, and begins with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic. The music is in 2/4 time and B-flat major.

The second system of the musical score continues the passage with three staves. The top staff is for Violin I, marked [violin I], and includes a *cres* (crescendo) marking. The middle staff is for Violin II, marked [violin II], and includes a *cres* marking. The bottom staff is for the Cello/Double Bass, marked arco, and includes a *pizz* section and a *cres* marking. The music continues in 2/4 time and B-flat major.

The most obvious opportunities for display by the first violin come in some of the variations in the third movement. The slow movement is one of Spohr's finest. This record which includes as a coupling a string quartet by Burgmüller is a must for all Spohr enthusiasts.

Besides these quartets now available on record, the 'solo' quartet, Op.43, was given in a BBC Radio 3 broadcast in 1984 and the F minor, Op.29/3, was broadcast about twenty years ago. The quartet in G major, Op.58/3, the first work composed by Spohr after he moved to Kassel in 1822, was performed both in Britain and in the Federal Republic in 1959 as part of the commemoration of his centenary of his death, but I have not heard of any recording of this being available. We also have tantalising fragments of its companion piece, the A minor, Op.58/2, which presumably came from a German radio performance of more than twenty years ago. Both these works have the interesting feature of having only three movements, with one of these combining elements of two of the usual movements. The second movement of Op.58/2 is a set of variations which develops towards the end into a kind of scherzo. The third movement of Op.58/3 mingles slow and quick sections, with the slow material dominating the end of the work. There are also German radio recordings of the E flat, Op.15/1, and of the 'solo' quartet in A major, Op.68, played by a solo violin accompanied by a string orchestra.

There have also been performances in Britain of the quartets in E minor, Op.45/2, and in D minor, Op.84/1. Both of these have many of the features typical of Spohr's mature quartets. They each have the usual four movements with a third movement that is nearer in tempo and style to a minuet than a scherzo. There is no doubt about the general predominance of the first violin part, but there is plenty for the other instruments to do. Indeed, compared to many of the quartets of the classical masters, there are few passages when all four of the instruments are not playing. Both works have first movements in which the outlines of conventional sonata form are clear to follow, including Spohr's favourite device of a rapid passage for the first violin towards the end of the second subject. But in neither work is this passage work particularly concerto-like or fails to blend with what precedes or follows it. In both works the development section of this movement is imaginative and meaningful. The quartet, Op.84/1, is notable for the strong contrast between its first and last movements, both of which are original in conception. The opening movement has a restless, brooding character punctuated by energetic passages for the first violin. There is much interweaving of short motives and the harmony, quite bitter at times, is masterly in its effect. The finale has a cheerful open-air character with some lively counterpoint and brilliant writing for all the instruments; again, like the first movement, it has no obvious predecessor in earlier Spohr works. The middle movements are effective, but less original. There are a number of earlier examples of the sombre minuet of similar character in such works as the 2nd Double Quartet, Op.77, and the trio is rather insubstantial. Both these works would be well worth having on disc.

There are several other quartets which receive favourable mention in Clive Brown's biography of Spohr such as the C major, Op.29/2, the C major, Op.45/1, the E flat, Op.58/1, the G major, Op.82/2, and the C major, Op.141, all of which would give us plenty to enjoy. I dare say we could find some beautiful passages and interesting textures even in the weakest of Spohr's quartets, but we have to consider what would be most likely to appeal to performers and to the listening public. One of the major difficulties in getting any of Spohr's quartets performed is to persuade an established group that they are worth the effort of learning when their existing repertoire is so big anyway.