

SPOHR AND THE SLEEVE NOTE

by Keith Warsop

MUSIC historians frequently cite newspaper and magazine criticisms to show the development of a composer's reputation but the gramophone record sleeve note seems to have been almost completely ignored. Yet some sleeve notes have reached the dimensions of scholarly essays and in fact H.C. Robbins Landon, the distinguished Haydn specialist, has reprinted some of his in various collections of his writings.

It is instructive to examine the sleeve notes of recordings of Spohr's music since the long playing record was introduced in the early 1950s to see how the annotators' perceptions of the composer have changed over the period as more and more of his works have been revived¹.

The first LPs of Spohr were issued in the United States on the Urania label in 1951 and 1952, taken mainly from continental broadcasts, and they enjoyed only a limited circulation. The first Spohr LP to make an impact on the general record-buying public was the celebrated Vienna Octet version of the Nonet which was released by Decca on LXT2782 in 1953.

What stands out about this sleeve note is the contrast between the conventional view of Spohr taken by the anonymous writer in his introduction and his enthusiastic response to the Nonet itself where his knowledge of the music obviously made all the difference. The general introduction is obviously a reflection of the received opinion as given in the various music histories and dictionary entries. The status quo at the time this record was released is exactly summed up in the opening section:

"As a composer, Spohr's reputation has greatly declined. He wrote in a wide variety of forms ... but although his religious music long enjoyed a vogue in Victorian England, especially the celebrated oratorio *The Last Judgment*, the greater part of his voluminous output is now forgotten."

We are then told:

"Spohr's originality lay chiefly in his feeling for colour. In harmony this led him into excesses of chromaticism which give much of his music a somewhat faded air; but it also caused him to experiment in writing for unusual and interesting combinations of instruments."

A list of these "unusual combinations" includes "a septet for three pianos and wind." This would have been an astounding combination if true and we can but imagine what Spohr might have done with it.

Moving on to the Nonet itself, the writer quotes the *Autobiography* on Tost's connection with its composition and then moves on to analyse the work itself. Much of this is "programme-note-ese" as in this from the section on the Adagio:

"A brief development modulates swiftly, finally reaching D major, whose tonic note is used as a pivot for the return to B flat for the recapitulation."

Many of the sleeve notes to be reviewed indulge in this sort of thing but the reader will be mercifully spared many further similar quotations.

However, the comments on the finale are genuinely helpful and make points which do not seem to be brought out elsewhere in the Spohr literature. It is worth quoting in full:

"The finale comes as near to farce as instrumental music can. The spirit is that of Haydn at his most jocular, and the humorous possibilities of the wind instruments are exploited to the full, especially those of the bassoon, the proverbial comedian of the orchestra. The

movement is in sonata-form, and Spohr makes his intentions clear at once by marking the woodwind restatement of the first subject 'scherzando'. The second subject is a particularly witty passage, the oboe tune being punctuated with sudden, abrupt silences, and then given an extraordinary restatement by cello and double bass beneath repeated notes from the other instruments. Riotous humour prevails throughout the development. The bassoon comes in late with the theme at one point and is unable to catch up, finally ranging so high in its discomfiture that its part has to be written in the tenor clef. It seems to regain confidence in the more familiar ground of the recapitulation, but even here makes two premature entries in the dialogue on the second subject theme."

It is interesting that, despite the writer's comment on Spohr's "excesses of chromaticism" and "somewhat faded air" in his introductory paragraphs, these points never enter his head when he is actually involved with and carried along by the Nonet itself.

The Heifetz recording of the Eighth Violin Concerto appeared in 1956 and was released in the UK the following year on RCA RB16009 (US number LM2027). The note, by John Rosenfield, music critic of the Dallas Morning News, is short and unmemorable. He tells us that Spohr "was considered by some in his day as a better composer than Beethoven" and then adds, rather confusedly, "He was also a better violinist than Beethoven was a pianist." However, his final comment is right on the ball – to use a phrase appropriate to the Dallas Morning News: "The concerto 'listens' as if it might be easy. Actually it poses prodigious difficulties of tone production, reaching stops, and needs from the artist an affinity for romantic expressiveness."

The same period saw the release on HMV ALP1462 of Sonatas and Duos played by Yehudi Menuhin and Giaconda de Vito, which included the first movement of Op.67 No.3 and the second and third movements of Op.67 No.2. The note, by Leonard Duck, says that Spohr's "solidly built German style is vitiated by a too frequent recourse to sliding chromatic progressions." Again, a reflection of what the music dictionaries say. The duos get fair praise though: "The way in which he surmounts the difficulties of the medium reveals a technical skill of the highest order ... Op.67, which contains some of his best work, ingeniously exploits the instruments so as to achieve effects of remarkable sonority and brilliance."

Then came the first recording of the Octet, played appropriately by the Vienna Octet (LXT5294; coupling Marcel Poot's Octet). A highly detailed anonymous sleeve note (also used on a later re-recording of the work without the cuts in the finale of LXT5294; its latest emanation was Decca Ace of Diamonds SDD256, coupled with Beethoven's Piano and Wind Quintet) discusses the arrangement with Tost which led to the composition of the Octet. The writer adds that Spohr is now little more than a name in the history books and only the Nonet has found a regular place in the repertoire.

"There can be no doubt that his facility and his rather comfortable brand of conservatism – he rejected Beethoven's later work in toto – were a greater recommendation to his contemporaries than to posterity. None the less, it would be illogical to suppose that the striking gifts which are evident in the Nonet do not emerge elsewhere in Spohr's music. In fact the Octet is a worthy successor to the Nonet and there is no reason why it should not achieve an equal degree of popularity."

The actual analysis is conventional but enthusiastic.

A recording by the Oistrakhs, father and son, of the Duo in D, Op.67 No.2, has had a number of incarnations but appears to have surfaced in the UK originally on Concert Hall M2291. The note by Robin Golding is notable for being the first which recalls the lines by Gilbert in *The Mikado* dealing with the punishment devised for the music hall singer who must attend a series "of masses and fugues and ops, by Bach interwoven with Spohr and Beethoven, at Classical

Monday Pops.” Mr Golding says that “in consigning the music of this genial and prolific composer to almost complete oblivion we rob ourselves of much innocent pleasure.”

The sleeve notes considered so far mark a first phase in which the conventional criticisms of Spohr are trotted out but are contradicted by enthusiasm for the particular work being recorded. We must suppose that the authors, being unfamiliar with Spohr’s music apart from the work being studied for the purpose of writing their note, were unwilling to challenge the received image of the composer.

The memorable recording of the First Clarinet Concerto played by Gervase de Peyer and issued on Oiseau Lyre SOL50204 in 1961 carried a joint sleeve note by the soloist and Charles Cudworth. This note marked the start of a second phase in the approach to Spohr by annotators. Without equivocation the note states: “... the two works on this disc, by two great composers of the early nineteenth century.” (the coupling was Weber’s Second Concerto).” This section of the note is by Mr de Peyer who adds:

“Both Weber and Spohr seem to have greatly enjoyed writing for the instrument, taking considerable trouble to understand its range and capabilities, which they exploited to the fullest possible extent, in a manner scarcely surpassed even in the clarinet writing of many modern composers.”

He goes on to say that Spohr showed “an extraordinarily astute grasp of the potentialities of the clarinet as a solo instrument.”

Charles Cudworth says that Spohr’s music has “been allowed to suffer too great an eclipse. Although little of that music is heard nowadays, it has considerable charm and often great melodic beauty, its greatest fault being an over-reliance on chromaticism.”

He makes the point that “when Spohr wrote his first clarinet concerto, he had already composed several fine violin concertos, and so had his own ideas on concerto form. Although he was a professed follower of Mozart, this concerto is already several degrees removed from the Mozartian type.” He then goes on to discuss the form of the first movement and says that it ends “in C major; more or less, that is – Spohr habitually inflected his music so much that his key-centres were inevitably unstable and had to be sustained by long pedal notes.”

Altogether this would have been one of the most illuminating sleeve notes on Spohr had not Cudworth perpetrated a major blunder. He misreads Spohr’s comments in the *Autobiography* about the Spanish finale of the Sixth Violin Concerto and instead attributes them to the clarinet work. Anyone who heard the clarinet concerto with this sleeve note before them would have been puzzled as they listened for Spanish melodies and the guitar-like accompaniment as these, of course, belong to the violin concerto. Still, Cudworth’s heart is in the right place. He concludes:

“It ends very softly in marked contrast to most of the rather blatant concertos of that period, and leaves us with the feeling that the modern world, in dismissing Spohr as just another of Tovey’s IHFs (Interesting Historical Figures) may well be underestimating both Spohr and the public which once adored him.”

There was now a hiatus of some five years in major Spohr releases – until 1966 in fact when the Decca group once again came to the rescue. Unfortunately this was the disappointing performance by Hyman Bress of the Eighth and Ninth Violin Concertos on Oiseau Lyre SOL278. Charles Cudworth again supplied the sleeve note and again he flew the flag for Spohr:

“A highly individual and gifted composer, whose works have fallen into unwarrantable disuse and neglect. In his time he was something of a revolutionary modernist, who by his use of chromaticism and unusual ideas on form and subject matter undoubtedly influenced the later 19th Century Romantics, much more than is now generally realised.”

The most significant step forward in this note, as compared even with Cudworth’s own previous

one, is the fact that the stereotyped critical comment on Spohr's chromaticism is abandoned and henceforth this is rarely to recur. What Cudworth does say is slightly different:

“As a composer, he is best described as a Classical-Romantic; his own ideal in music was Mozart, and he carried even beyond their logical conclusion certain elements in Mozart's work, such as sweetness of melody and chromatic inflexion of the old major and minor tonality – some would say that he carried these elements too far, and that some of his own works suffer from an over-emphasis of these very features. But the best of his works deserve a better fate than the disuse into which they have fallen. Among the finest and most original of his compositions, the two concertos on the present disc rate very highly.”

The criticism of chromaticism is now attributed to “some” and by implication Cudworth is distancing himself from it. The note contains a very compressed but detailed survey of Spohr's life and excellent analyses of the two concertos. He ends his comments on the Ninth Concerto thus:

“Throughout the work Spohr displays his mastery of chromaticism and enharmonic modulation, a gift which sometimes led him astray, but which is here highly effective.”

The end of the 1960s saw some highly important Spohr recordings which carried outstanding sleeve notes. Among these the one by Folker Göthel for Decca SXL6319 (Nonet and Third Double Quartet performed by the Vienna Octet) is in a class of its own for Spohr scholarship and a coherent philosophy of the composer's musical personality and development.

That a Spohr revival was by now discernible is noted by Dr Göthel. This “Spohr” is a being on a completely different plane from the one in earlier sleeve notes whose music was vitiated by chromatic mannerisms. Here we have “one of the central figures of the romantic musical development” who “became the exponent of a new romantic spirit without which the development of German music right up to Wagner's ‘Tristan’ is unthinkable.” Here the musician who “was considered by some in his day as a greater composer than Beethoven” is again put on the same level as the classical master. Dr Göthel writes that “it is very tempting to compare the Nonet to Beethoven's Septet ... and to consider it as the Septet's romantic counterpart.”

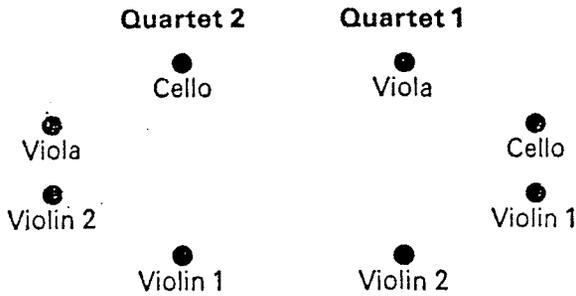
In turning to the Third Double Quartet Dr Göthel makes the point that Spohr “is marked by a peculiar mixture of tradition-consciousness and the spirit of advance.” He waxes rhapsodic over the trio section of the scherzo: “one of the most enchanting idylls from Spohr's master pen.” We are now far removed from those earlier, rather apologetic sleeve notes. Altogether Dr Göthel's note to this record ought to be read by all Spohr students, it is so illuminating.

The 1969 EMI recording of the First Double Quartet by the Melos Ensemble (HQS118: coupled with Mendelssohn's Octet) offers a more conventional sleeve note. The coupling allows the writer, W.A. Chislett, to link the two composers too. He says: “Although Spohr's music is virtually unknown today there is plenty of evidence that Mendelssohn regarded it highly.”

Much of the note is taken up with a summary of Spohr's career and the extracts from the *Autobiography* which relate the composition of the First Double Quartet. He tells us that the work is structurally conventional “but throughout, the composer retains something of the style of the old concerto grosso, with one quartet of soloists and the second allotted more of a ripieno role.”

There is one novelty, however. Chislett says: “Spohr might almost have had stereo recording in mind when he wrote his double quartets!” And a diagram shows “the seating arrangement of the musicians in the Spohr Double Quartet”:

The seating arrangement of the musicians in the Spohr Double Quartet is :



Two unusual pieces are included on an American Candide record of the Eighth Violin Concerto, released at this same period (CE31043) – the Duo in E minor for violin and viola and the Potpourri on themes from *Jessonda* for violin, cello and orchestra. The sleeve note, by Gisela Baust, moves confidently through the newer atmosphere now surrounding attitudes to Spohr:

“Spohr’s compositions, placed by his contemporaries and colleagues on the same level as those of Beethoven, were considered even later as so significant that Brahms, Wagner and Richard Strauss declared their admiration for them.”

The comments on the Eighth Concerto are in no doubt over its stature:

“Spohr was aware of his dual role as a composer and a soloist. The solo passages, demanding a virtuoso technique reminding one of Paganini’s and corresponding to Spohr’s violinistic ability, were embedded in a seriously worked out and balanced composition. Therefore, Tutti and Solo face each other as equally qualified partners, complementing each other and thus raising the work above the usual level of a virtuoso showpiece.”

Spohr “became somewhat forgotten later, in spite of the encomia of the other composers cited above. Today, as many of his works are being played again, we see in him a mediator between the classical and romantic styles who exerted great influence on the further evolution of music” is the sleeve note’s concluding paragraph.

The analysis of the *Jessonda* Potpourri is especially interesting and as the work is ignored in all published Spohr research, we give it here complete:

“The Potpourri, Op.64, written, as it were, in memory of his opera – first performed by Spohr in 1823 in Kassel – is a work in which operatic content and instrumental melody and virtuosity are interwoven in a masterly manner. Aside from the extraordinary technical requirements in the violin part – natural on the part of Spohr – this composition clearly divulges the high level of instrumental technique reached by cellists at that time. The passage work, inspired by the technique of the violin, demands exceedingly high virtuosity from the cellist. And going beyond, Spohr raises his requirements in the varied expressiveness in the high and low registers.

The single sections of the work – Andante, Allegro moderato, Adagio, Tempo primo (Allegro moderato), Allegro – follow without pause. The two instruments – corresponding to the opera – stand for *Jessonda* and her sister *Amazili* on one hand, and their lovers *Tristan* and *Nadori* on the other.

The concerto begins with a theme of the finale of the second act (of the opera) which renders the hopeless situation of *Jessonda*, separated from her country and her lover. In the second section (Allegro moderato), *Jessonda* and *Tristan* meet unexpectedly and sing of their happiness. The theme of the last section is taken from the Duet of *Amazili* and *Nadori*.”

An RCA 1969 release (LSC3068) included the First Double Quartet played by members of the Heifetz-Piatigorsky Concerts series (coupling Dvořák's *Dumky* Trio). As usual, the sleeve note quotes the *Autobiography* on how the work came to be composed, there is a sympathetic summary of Spohr's career and views, and the usual comment about his neglect today. However, one wonders if the author, Philip Hart, really studied the Double Quartet.

He says that the first and last movements "are cast in sonata form so traditional that they might be taken as textbook models." Which models include, presumably, the new theme in the development of the first movement. Mr Hart does grant that the Scherzo "shows a real sense of forward motion" but the slow movement "neither offers development of its melodic material nor really plumbs great depth of feeling." Or, we might summarise, it is not so traditional that it might be taken as a textbook model. There is finally a passing genuflection to the "cloying chromaticism" dogma. One's final thought is that this author was tackling his task as one in a series of sleeve notes for the Heifetz-Piatigorsky series of records and had not listened more than superficially to Spohr's music.

If the Folker Göthel note referred to earlier reaches a new standard in scholarship and evaluation, the one written by the British composer Tom Eastwood for Decca's 1970 recording of the Piano and Wind Quintet, Op.52, (members of the Vienna Octet on SXL6463, coupled with Dvořák's double-bass Quintet, Op.77) is full of information, and makes comments which go straight to the point. The very opening brilliantly reworks the standard reference to Spohr's posthumous neglect: "If some composers have only achieved fame after death, the exact reverse is the history of Spohr; he had to wait for death to become unknown."

Mr Eastwood refers to the fact that "he is castigated in the textbooks for a cloying chromaticism, to which the eclipse of his music is ascribed. There is no sign of this in the Quintet, the style points forward in an intriguing way to Schumann, and what chromaticism there is takes the form of some free and effective modulations, and is piquant rather than saccharine."

The style of Spohr's piano writing is discussed. Mr Eastwood mentions "such men as Clementi, Dussek, Hummel, Field and Ries." He adds: "Such a list of names does not mean that Spohr's Quintet is in any way derivative, only that the lay-out of the piano part is technically influenced by these masters of the instrument."

There are some fine things in the descriptions of the movements, too many to give here and these two from the finale must suffice: "The first subject has a fine anger, like Chopin in his revolutionary mood." Then, "The second subject is so *bien trouvé* it must have been the envy of Spohr's colleagues ... There is a kind of impertinent impetus about it that is irresistible."

A 1972 recording of the three Sonatas Concertantes for violin and harp, Opp.113-115, on the Orion label ORS7262 played by Louis Kaufman (violin) and Susann McDonald (harp) was never released in the UK but became available through specialist import dealers. The sleeve note by Kaufman is unusual in looking at Spohr from the angle of a violin virtuoso. After commenting on the "decline in general esteem for his music after his death", Kaufman puts the record straight: "Justice must again award a place to this neglected master for the noble purity and the grave beauty of many of his remarkable compositions." Kaufman discusses Spohr in relation to Paganini, examines his style of playing and quotes Spohr on the tunings in the works for violin and harp.

The Spohr Society of Great Britain helped to sponsor two 1973 records issued by Oryx with sleeve notes by Maurice Powell, then the Society's chairman and now President of the Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft based at Kassel. On Oryx 1828 where John Denman performs the Second Clarinet Concerto (coupling Carl Stamitz Concerto in B flat), Mr Powell points to the work as being "a milestone in Spohr's search for his ideal concerto form and one

of his finest works.”

The Notturmo, Op.34, on Oryx 1830, performed by the Wind Section of the Little Orchestra of London conducted by Leslie Jones (coupling Hummel’s Octet-Partita in E flat) is categorised as sharing “much of the genial high spirits, sense of humour and superb workmanship of its immediate predecessors, the ever-popular Nonet, Op.31, and Octet, Op.32.” Mr Powell sums up both the Spohr and Hummel works as “light in texture but musically substantial, and entertaining but not trivial.”

The Maurice Powell sleeve notes herald the third phase in the treatment of Spohr. There is no longer any reference to the weaknesses of “faded chromaticisms” but neither is there special pleading on the lines of “whose works we unjustly neglect” or “the loss is ours.” Instead the works are described simply, beauties and novelties pointed out, circumstances of composition explained and the record left to do the rest.

A recording of the Duo, Op.67 No.2, played by Pinchas Zukerman and Itzhak Perlman on EMI ASD3430 released in 1978, has achieved classic status but the sleeve note by Robin Golding is a reprint of the one on the Oistrakh Concert Hall record referred to above, with the errors left uncorrected.

CRD1054 of 1979 is also highly regarded: The Nash Ensemble’s coupling of the Nonet and Octet. The sleeve note, by John Lade, gives a sympathetic account of Spohr’s career and tells us that “some of his chamber music ... is enjoying a well-deserved return to popular favour.” “Popular favour” – we could almost be back in the 1840s! To Mr Lade the whole story of Spohr’s relationship with Tost “suggests one of Grimm’s fairy tales” (did he know of the Grimms’ links with Kassel?). After discussing the finale of the Nonet Mr Lade adds: “its cheerful vitality makes this one of Spohr’s immediately attractive movements though there are probably many more to equal it in the immense number of his works that one never hears.” The movement must have made an impact on Mr Lade for it became the signature tune for his BBC radio programme “Record Review”.

The Nash again entered the lists in 1981 with CRD1099 (Septet, Op.147 and Piano and Wind Quintet, Op.52). The sleeve note writer, Robin Golding, for the third time recycles the start of his notes previously used for the two recordings of Op.67 No.2 (the references to *The Mikado*) and yet again tells us that “in consigning the music of this genial and prolific composer to almost complete oblivion we deprive ourselves of much innocent pleasure.” Just a minute. What happened to the return to “popular favour” of the previous Nash sleeve note two years earlier? Ah, of course, Mr Golding had originally written his paragraph in the 1950s and found it too much trouble to rephrase it.

The analysis of the Quintet is a pedestrian description, heavily reliant on the *Autobiography*. In the Septet Mr Golding categorises its opening as “serious, almost Brahmsian”, and he ends perceptively. In comparison with the finale of the Quintet “the overall mood is better integrated; at nearly seventy, Spohr’s touch was still as sure as ever.”

Another “classic” Spohr record is Argo ZRG920 of 1980 on which Antony Pay performs the First and Second Clarinet Concertos. In his sleeve note, Maurice Powell describes Hermstedt’s prowess on the clarinet: “his mastery would have rendered Mozart’s Stadler speechless!” After discussing the two concertos, Mr Powell ends: “Spohr wrote two further concertos (1821 and 1828), two concert-pieces and Sechs deutsche Lieder with clarinet obbligato (Op.103) for Hermstedt. His achievement in so enriching the clarinet’s solo repertoire has not been equalled in quantity or quality by any composer of comparable stature.”

The approach of the Spohr bicentenary in 1984 brought increased activity from the record companies with more and more areas of the composer’s output being explored. *Die letzten Dinge*

(*The Last Judgment*) emerged in 1983 on the Jubilate label (JU85191/2) with a sleeve note by Dr Ernst-Jürgen Dreyer which concentrated on the harmonic influence of Spohr on Wagner. We are told that Spohr's newly-discovered clarinet concertos rank "alongside Mozart's own composition"; that *Faust* and *Jessonda* "left their traces in Wagner's as well as Brahms' and Dvořák's works."

Dr Dreyer goes on: "As Spohr's music disappeared from the concert halls, his harmonic structures continued to influence the work of others such as Wagner whose use of the chromatic elements in his *Tristan* had opened up new musical horizons." He says that after his rediscovery "Spohr was tacitly understood to be Wagner's direct predecessor, not only in compositional skill and in the use of representative themes (leitmotifs) but specifically in his handling of harmony as exemplified in his operatic and chamber music, thereby anticipating the chromaticism of *Tristan*." Yet he compares this with the classicism of Spohr's music which had "appeared almost antique, hopelessly out of date compared to the innovative complexity of the 'music of the future'." Dr Dreyer sums up Spohr: "A music entirely classical in structure yet glowing with innovation." And, in deep philosophical mood, he finds that in the most moving parts of the oratorio, such as the double quartet "Selig sind die Toten" ("Blessed are the departed"), "Louis Spohr is therefore neither a Mozart disciple nor Wagner's predecessor but reveals in his particular language the secrets of *Die letzten Dinge*."

The same year saw the release of "Romantische Bläsermusik" on Carus 63.118 on which Jost Michaels directed the Detmolder Bläserkreis in the Notturmo, Op.34 (coupling Mendelssohn's C major overture for wind, Op.24). In the note, Michaels points out that the two works on the record come after the great period of compositions for wind ensembles and are "special cases among the compositions of their times in general." He thinks that "the very special attraction in the instrumentation of the Notturmo by Spohr lies in the combination of the concertante chamber music style typical of this composer with the tonal peculiarities of the Janizary music and its characteristic percussive instruments (the triangle, cymbals and bass drum) and the piccolo flute, to which, in the Trio of the Polacca, posthorn signals are added as a special feature." After discussing the circumstances surrounding the work's composition Michaels says: "It is astonishing not only with what confidence its composer set about instrumenting in an area that, at first, was quite foreign to him as a violinist, but also with what tonal understanding he treated the wind instruments, both individually and in their many combinations." ¶

Ekkehart Kroher wrote the sleeve note for Schwann Musica Mundi VMS1620 of 1980, the Third Symphony and the *Jessonda* overture. He introduces a point new to Spohr commentators in his criticisms of the symphony's Scherzo by recalling Schumann's dictum that "scherzos are not Spohr's strong point." Herr Kroher says that the Trio "is not sufficiently contrasted with the scherzo itself, despite its chromatic harmonies and lively instrumentation." However this is the only movement of which he is critical. He reserves special praise for the finale:

"Any doubts about Spohr's genius should be dispelled by the closing Allegro, in Alla Breve rhythm. Its vigour is quite sufficient to justify the final key-change to C major, and it also generates the four-part fugato (with a theme based on the first subject) which performs the function of a development from bar 184 onwards; here polyphony is exploited as a means to heighten and intensify the expressive quality of the music."

An even more enthusiastic sleeve note writer is Walter Labhart on Jecklin-Disco 593, the String Quartets, Op.29 No.1 and Op.15 No.2. Herr Labhart says:

"The rich musical substance of the two string quartets recorded here is based on the one hand on plastically formed themes that lend themselves to development, and on the other hand on highly differentiated structures that – particularly in the D major quartet – are a

good deal more original than those of the majority of Spohr's contemporaries." So by now, even the conventional classical structure of Spohr's works is an idea which is being rethought. Herr Labhart explains:

"The end of the main movement of Op.15 No.2 offers an example of the exceptional density that occurs as a result of the skilful superimposition and permeation of opposing artistic resources; while the first violin plays a melodic line embellished with brief appoggiature, the second violin and the viola exchange a stereotype figure in dactylic rhythm and the concise central idea of the first subject, perfecting the masterly allocation of parts that can be previously seen with similar subtleties in the development. These three melodic lines, whose rhythmic profile is brought to an optimum peak (not for the first time) in the coda, are underpinned by the cello with calmly moving crotchets, which in turn are based on a pedal-point in D that creates sonority."

On the first movement of the E flat quartet, he says: "The special feature here is the interruption five times of the regularly ascending and descending form by alternating shorter and longer rests, which create breaks in the flow of the music unusual for the period."

Herr Labhart's enthusiasm might be thought to carry him away, though, in discussing the fugal finale of Op.15 No.2: "This contrapuntal form and its musical realisation create the impression of a promising preparation for the late string quartets Beethoven wrote between 1824 and 1826."

We return to hackwork in the sleeve notes by Keith Anderson for a couple of records issued on the Hong Kong-based Marco Polo label. The Second Symphony is on 6.220360 (coupling Franz Lachner First Symphony) and Mr Anderson's note is mainly a summary, not always accurate, of Spohr's career with a brief comment on the symphony which mentions "sound craftsmanship" and "gift for melody." There is much waffle about Spohr's introduction of the baton to London but nothing about why critics thought the Second "the most perfect" of Spohr's compositions, nor indeed why anyone should think it worth reviving today².

The Seventh and Twelfth Violin Concertos are on Marco Polo 6.220406. Once again Mr Anderson's note is disappointing. Three paragraphs on the Seventh Concerto – generally thought to be one of Spohr's finest works – characterise it as "demonstrating a strong dramatic sense, a relatively conservative retention of classical form and a command of the contemporary technical possibilities of the violin." The slow movement "is a fine example of the lyrical aspect of Spohr's genius, unexpected in its shifts of key." †

The most that Mr Anderson can find to say about the Twelfth Concerto is that it "serves as an admirable exercise for the principles of playing to be outlined in the Grand Violin School published three years later." As the Twelfth Concerto does not show "a relatively conservative retention of classical form" one would have thought the way was clear to compare it with the Eighth (*Gesangszene*) from the formal viewpoint. Poor Spohr cannot win with Mr Anderson when it comes to form.

The final group of records issued in connection with the bicentenary have sleeve notes written by scholars associated with the Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft so that here we can guarantee we are far removed from hackwork. The German conductor Christian Fröhlich opens up new territory on MD+GG1244, a Dabringhaus und Grimm 1986 release of songs by Spohr and his pupil Norbert Burgmüller (singer Mitsuko Shirai). He deals with the so-called Kassel school of Spohr's pupils who, apart from Burgmüller, included Karl Friedrich Curschmann and Hugo Staehle. Herr Fröhlich, discussing Spohr's songs, says:

"When we compare the songs of older contemporaries with his first cycle, the *Sechs deutsche Lieder* published in 1809 as Op.25, we already notice in Spohr's cycle a consciously progressive, even exemplary declamatory technique and a sensitive

psychological treatment of the text, achieved primarily through bold harmonies far ahead of their time. In his later settings .. Spohr continued to show a way leading to the creativity of Hugo Wolf.”

We are told that until the songs of Schubert, Schumann and Loewe became popular it was the songs of Spohr and his pupils which were known and loved for home performance. The detailed focus on the songs of the Op.72 set concentrates on the psychological and emotional treatment of the texts through the harmony and the form which provide an admirable introduction to one of Spohr’s best sets of songs.

The Hyperion recordings of the four Double Quartets, with some sponsorship from the Spohr Society of Great Britain, have sleeve notes by Maurice Powell (1 and 2 on A66141; 3 and 4 on A66142). Once again Mr Powell indulges in no frills, keeping to the point both on Spohr’s life and on the Double Quartets. It is interesting that Mr Powell quotes Sir George Smart on a performance Spohr gave of No.1 in 1825. Sir George says that the work took 28 minutes, yet on the record the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields Chamber Ensemble takes 21 minutes. Did Sir George include the breaks between movements in his timing? Or were Spohr’s partners unable to cope with faster speeds? An intriguing question. As the Academy Ensemble makes all repeats, that will not provide the solution to the mystery. Mr Powell concludes: “In any final assessment, however, the Double Quartets must be reckoned to be of an exceptional order and deserve a secure place in the repertoire of supreme examples of Romantic chamber music.”

Hartmut Becker offers a sympathetic introduction to Spohr’s masterly B minor String Quintet, recorded on Concerto Bayreuth CB16002 in 1983 (coupling Mozart Quintet fragments). He says that the first movement is developed from one theme:

“such economy of material necessitates great skill in counterpoint along with imagination in the harmonic, rhythmic and tone composition if the work is to possess the contrast necessary for the sonata form without becoming monotonous. Spohr’s resolution of these problems demonstrates the degree to which he mastered the art of composition.”

And “the almost daredevil energy” of the scherzo takes us a long way from “the dreamy, sentimental Spohr” of popular misconception.

On Dabringhaus und Grimm MD+GG1144 we have the String Quartets, Op.29 No.1 and Op.74 No.3, and Herr Becker nominates them as “among the most important works in this genre.” Indeed, he finds that the former work is “one of the supreme achievements in the genre.” One particular point in the first movement draws forth awed comment: “In the packed development, four measures are particularly remarkable; in these the cello chromatically spirals its way upward, expanding through a twelfth, while truly breathtaking chromatic harmonies anticipate Wagner’s *Tristan*.”

The D minor quartet, Op.74 No.3, is “analogous to the late works of both Beethoven and Schubert. It strives less for intimacy than for intensity of expression conducive to performance in a large hall.” The Scherzo “seems possessed by a demon. Abrupt changes in the dynamics and harmonic colouring, sharp sforzati, and testy relentlessness in the deep instruments characterise this movement, whose power is worthy of a Beethoven.”

Herr Becker has been quoted at length in order to put his notes to the Orfeo recording of the Sixth and Ninth Symphonies in perspective (SO94841, released 1984). With his high regard for Spohr’s best works, he is not prepared to make concessions for the master’s lesser opuses. This explains what appears a completely perverse sleeve note for the two symphonies. Herr Becker divides Spohr’s symphonic production into two main groups: numbers 2-5 which are the master works; and numbers 6-9, the weaker ones. Of these he says: “Their flow of ideas had become thinner and their style exhibits those characteristics of mannerism – of a static self-satisfaction

with what has been attained – which separates them from the imagination, intellectual vigour and temperament of the earlier works.” In the Ninth Symphony, he says that its appearance of breaking new ground by being in two parts is deceptive; the idea occurs only in a very superficial manner.

These points are well taken, and in an overall survey of the symphonies could be justified by detailed examples; but in the context of a record sleeve note whose purpose is to help the purchaser towards appreciating the works on which he has spent his money they are certainly inappropriate. There are positive points in the two symphonies which could have been enlarged on. All credit to Herr Becker’s integrity but alas for the newcomer to Spohr who buys the record and looks to the note for a way into the music.

The Orfeo set of the four Clarinet Concertos (S88842H, also 1984) also has notes by Herr Becker and here he is unable to accept the Third Concerto as on the same level of the others. He says: “Throughout long passages the orchestral part is limited to a purely accompanying role; the orchestration is rather undifferentiated.” The work “despite inventive ideas, is musically the weakest in the series of four clarinet concertos by Spohr.”

He has no reservations about the other three concertos and puts Spohr’s neglect down to prejudice:

“Prejudices about Spohr’s music have long caused him to be neglected as a composer, a phenomenon that is, of course, based on thoughtlessness rather than expert knowledge since only very few of his compositions are ‘known’. How one-sided a representation of the Romantic period can be without including Spohr is demonstrated by his four Concertos for Clarinet and Orchestra.”

In the Second Concerto: “The opening movement (Allegro) with its energetic, heraldic flow of themes proves the absurdity of the biased notion of the ‘effeminacy’ of Spohr’s music.”

And in the Fourth: “The mood is serious and restrained. It replaces the refreshing invention, verve and passion of the first two concertos with maturity, noblesse and solidity.”

Herr Becker’s third Orfeo sleeve note is for the song recital by Julia Varady and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau on S103841A. He tells us that in the Op.103 set with clarinet obligato:

“Spohr entrusted to the clarinet entirely new, unusual functions – the player needs to be a complete master not only of great technical ability but of every expressive nuance from a gentle murmur and a delicate cantabile to a piercing cry of grief. His task is never to provide a mere illustrative background sound; he has to be a partner of equal rank, indeed often enough the one who really sustains the emotion.”

The Philips 1987 release of *Die letzten Dinge* (on 416627-2, a CD-only issue) also has notes by Hartmut Becker. He makes the point that the German romantics such as Schumann and Wagner tended to stylise the “great masters of the past almost to the point where they had become timeless, monumental ‘classics’.” This tendency, he says, was “foreign to Spohr, who after all had had personal experience of Beethoven and even Haydn.” Therefore “it was of no value to him to seek salvation by returning to the past, but to find his own path through a knowledge of tradition.” This tradition, Herr Becker says, was the North German Protestant one.

The motivation is sought for Spohr’s turning to texts from the Apocalypse “written in symbolic and obscure language which had made it difficult to set to music earlier” and he finds it in Spohr’s membership of the Freemasons, “a vital motif in the life of Spohr.” Once again “Selig sind die Toten” is singled out for special praise: “This belongs among the most meaningful and beautiful expressions in the entire genre of oratorio.”

As members of the Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft, both Maurice Powell and Hartmut Becker might be considered active propagandists for the composer (with stern discriminations

in the case of Herr Becker) so the views expressed in their sleeve notes should rightly be looked at against the opinions of non-partisans.

The startling conclusion is that Messrs Powell and Becker are perhaps too close to their subject to realise how much his stock has risen in the critical world in recent years – certainly in some degree thanks to the dedication of their own work. However, they are inhibited in making claims for Spohr which might look too ridiculous, especially when placed against the traditional “faded chromaticisms” history-book image of the composer.

That the non-partisans are not inhibited by this consideration and in fact consider Spohr as once again a great master – even if not on the level of Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven – is clear from the sleeve notes on the most important recent Spohr records, heralding perhaps a further phase in attitudes to the composer.

Michael Freyhan, in his notes to the First and Second Piano Trios (Kingdom KCLCD2004; released in December 1988) describes No.1 as “intensely original, imaginative in its textures, at the same time serious, virtuosic and full of charm. Certainly it belongs to its period but the music is by no means dated.” Dealing with the Scherzo, he says: “One might have stumbled into a Dvořák Slavonic Dance, except that the year in which this work was written was the year in which Dvořák was born.”

He is even more ecstatic on Trio No.2: “The slow movement shows Spohr at the height of his imaginative powers ... journeying beyond the spheres to the extra-terrestrial B double flat major.”

The distinguished oboist and composer Heinz Holliger, writing the sleeve note for the Second Concertante for violin, harp and orchestra on Novalis 150023-1 (released summer 1988 coupled with Mozart Flute and Harp Concerto) says:

“Upon listening to the introduction of the first movement of the Concertante in E minor for the first time, there are very few people who would be able to guess that the work was written in 1807. Neither Mendelssohn nor Schumann was born yet, Schubert only ten years old, and Weber’s *Freischütz* still awaiting its inception, but the bold, chromatic harmony and the intensely colourful and refined orchestration of this work foreshadow Romanticism at its most mature. In this early work, recorded here for the first time, all the elements of Spohr’s unmistakable personal style have reached their full flowering; an amazingly powerful and imaginative harmony, an innovative and resourceful treatment of the instruments, and an often almost excessively tender lyricism are moulded into a classical form which constituted Spohr’s ideal practically throughout his over fifty-year-long career as a composer.”

Discussing Spohr’s writing for harp, he mentions “a style of writing for the harp which makes the harp parts of Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Liszt and Wagner seem extremely conventional.”

Herr Holliger’s mention of Spohr’s “bold, chromatic harmony” and “amazingly powerful and imaginative harmony” shows what a long road we have travelled since the “excesses of chromaticism which give much of his music a somewhat faded air” of 1953.

In the sleeve notes to Spohr recordings over the past 36 years we can follow the milestones along this road to rehabilitation for the very facet of his style which used to be so roundly condemned.

Notes

1. It has not proved possible or desirable to study every single sleeve note for every Spohr record release, but a wide enough selection has been chosen to give this survey a broad enough base.
2. “The most perfect orchestral composition of Spohr”; J.W. Davison, *The Musical World*, xvii, p.51 (1842). “The most lovely and perfect orchestral work of Spohr”; *The Atlas*, xvii, p.266 (1842).