

SPOHR'S FOURTH SYMPHONY: A REQUIEM FOR GERMANY?

by Keith Warsop

When a symphony can be related to its composer's known or deduced feelings as expressed in letters or diaries of the time or in comments directly about the work commentators are often able to build an extensive exegesis which can go a long way in making the music "understandable" to listeners. Where the symphony has an avowed programme, however, concentration on this external feature can sometimes hamper understanding of the music. But where such programmes have been posited as a "front" for or an externalisation of the composer's deeper or subconscious motivation for the work, then again a sympathetic bridge is built for appreciation.

Prime examples of composers who come into this category are Tchaikovsky, Mahler and Shostakovich. In the case of Tchaikovsky, it is true, his music had little difficulty in achieving popularity with the broader public but was often sniffily dismissed by the serious musical establishment. In Mahler's case the symphonies struggled to make headway except with a dedicated core of enthusiasts. Shostakovich falls in between - some of his symphonies were immediate successes and recognised as important works while others suffered the same criticisms as Mahler's. In the case of all three composers, interpretation based on a supposed internal motivation has made their symphonies acceptable and popular, as well as critically respectable.

This is quite a modern way of penetrating a composer's world. Earlier examples were often romantically fanciful and commentators frequently lacked much authentic material on which to base their interpretations, but such works as Mozart's G minor (K.550), the Beethoven cycle, Schubert's "Unfinished" and the symphonies of Schumann and Brahms were all put under the microscope. There is no doubt that such treatment helped considerably in the rise of these works to popularity, alongside, of course, the intrinsic merits of the music itself.

How do these points relate to Spohr, a composer whose innermost thoughts and feelings have never been considered much in analyses of his music? The Fourth Symphony, "Die Weihe der Töne" (The Consecration of Sound) offers an ideal model for such interpretation.

When Spohr wrote to his friend, the Leipzig music critic Rochlitz, in the summer of 1828 and expressed the happiness and satisfaction he felt in his present situation as Music Director in Kassel, along with the contentment of his family life, he could hardly have foreseen that within four years everything would have taken a bitter turn. By the summer of 1832 Spohr had suffered a series of hammer blows in both his personal and professional life. The death of his beloved younger brother, Ferdinand, in 1831 followed by that of his close friend, librettist and fellow Liberal, Carl Pfeiffer, at the age of 28, and the worries over the declining health of his wife, Dorette, were counterpointed by the situation in Kassel caused by the outbreak of revolution in 1830 and the reaction against it. Apart from the blows to Spohr's Liberal sympathies and his hopes of seeing a united, democratic Germany, events also affected the artistic sphere of his life as the opera house orchestra was disbanded and the performance of opera suspended.

All in all, the future must have looked bleak for Spohr during his summer holidays in 1832 as he and his wife were taking the cure at the spa town of Nenndorf. While there he browsed through a new volume

of poems by his late friend Carl Pfeiffer and was particularly struck by "The Consecration of Sound". The poem, with its imagery of the relationship between sound and life, inspired Spohr with the idea of setting it as a cantata in memory of Pfeiffer but he soon became possessed by the challenge of using it as the basis for a large-scale orchestral work. An earlier suggestion from Rochlitz, that a symphony might be written using "infrequently or never-used forms" for the movements coalesced with the imagery of the poem. In tackling the work it was possible to form musical movements based on certain verses of the poem; these verses themselves gave the clue for the formal treatment. The lines about the army marching to war provided the opportunity for a march movement and therefore descriptive of the poem but also an "infrequently used" form in symphonies. This leads on to a "thanksgiving for victory" and here Spohr uses an old chorale. But a more conventional romantic composer surely would have juggled with the verses of the poem in order to conclude the symphony with the "thanksgiving for victory" chorale and a triumphant finale. Spohr, however, ends with the funeral music and "consolation through tears" which brings the symphony to a peaceful if resigned conclusion. Is not the work, then, a Requiem for Pfeiffer and Spohr's now lost world of happiness, and, as the two men were Liberals, also a German Requiem for the Liberal democracy which was not to be? If this is the real motivation behind Spohr's symphony, it should now be possible to interpret the work convincingly on this basis.

THE FIRST MOVEMENT:

From the silent void, we reach the sound of life itself interwoven with its perfect exemplification through nature - the birdsong, the gentle breezes, the wandering stream. This is almost the Garden of Eden - everything is in equilibrium, an ideal state of things. Then the storm breaks out, threatening this Eden, smashing the sounds of life itself into fragments. But the storm is a thing of nature too and so it subsides, allowing the recapitulation to be fairly literal, bringing back the equilibrium, thus re-emphasising the ideal state of things which the symphony fails to achieve again, the "ideal" for Germany which has been lost and the "best time" for Spohr himself which can never be regained. Hints of the storm close the movement to show what upsets might lie ahead.

THE SECOND MOVEMENT:

Here Spohr treats the sounds associated with the lullaby, the dance and the lover's serenade. Musically, the high point of the movement is the appearance of all three sections simultaneously - technically, as has been pointed out, similar to the Dance Scene in Mozart's "Don Giovanni". From the point of view of the programme, what is the significance of this coming together? Is it just a piece of compositional skill, there for its own sake, or is there a deeper motivation behind it? If the first movement has shown an ideal state which has now vanished over the horizon, perhaps here we have an attempt to turn one's back on the wider world and look to one's own immediate domestic and social interests in an effort to avoid squaring up to the realities. The juxtaposition of the three elements then shows that such spheres have their limitations - we admire the composer's skill but a heartfelt synthesis is never achieved. After the sections have been brought together by intellectual prowess they then perforce go their separate ways again. Furthermore, the attempt to ignore reality and live in a self-enclosed world is fraught with peril. The safe haven of the home and society is under threat from what now follows.

THE THIRD MOVEMENT:

A fanfare blasts out a call to arms as war breaks in on the self-contained world of the second movement. To a jaunty march tune an army marches

into battle. At this point Spohr introduces an element not in Pfeiffer's poem, "anxious feelings of those left at home". From the musical angle, this brings a contrasting section while programmatically it shows that behind the glamour of war lies the drab reality. Surely the sections juxtaposing the sounds of battle and the "anxious feelings" show that military glory is not the answer. But the return of the victorious army momentarily sweeps aside these doubts as the "thanksgiving for victory" begins. All seems to end in triumph - but Spohr withholds a clinching, climactic statement of the chorale that would pin the symphony unhesitatingly to this view of life. A lingering doubt remains and Spohr does not end his work at this point.

THE FOURTH MOVEMENT:

Funeral music starts up with drum rolls and sighs from the wind instruments. A gravely beautiful chorale on cellos with a halting pizzicato accompaniment shows what a distance we have travelled from the Edenesque world of the first movement. A distance matched in Spohr's own life between the world of 1828 and that of 1832 as well as that between the hoped-for New Germany and the hopeless reality of 1832. Now comes a resigned acceptance of things - the "consolation through tears" section of the finale brings with it peace but it is the peace of exhaustion. Life, Spohr seems to have accepted, must go on but the good times, the best times, can never be brought back.

SUMMARY:

The symphony sets out from a point where the sounds of life and nature create an ideal equilibrium. Once this state has been lost, we have to come to terms with what remains and this the symphony does. This pattern perfectly matches the hopes and disappointments of German Liberalism as well as Spohr's own personal situation, adequately attested in surviving letters and other documents. The question remains as to whether the musical material is strong enough to make such an interpretation convincing. The fact that the symphony made such a big impression originally and remained in the repertoire for so many years, as well as being considered Spohr's orchestral masterpiece, must argue in its favour. Ultimately each listener must draw his own conclusions.

AFTERMATH:

If we accept Spohr's deeper motivation for the work as deduced here, then surely we can expect this to surface again in other areas of his life at this time? Take his remarriage to Marianne Pfeiffer in 1836 and his statement in The Autobiography that "I now lived again in my former and accustomed domestic manner and felt unspeakably happy with my wife". This has been put forward as the rather self-satisfied comment of a man who lacked deeper emotional feeling. Perhaps it should rather be regarded as the offhand summary of events by one who did not desire to reveal these deeper feelings in what is basically a straightforward record of the outward events of his life. The remarriage can also be thought of as an attempt to regain the lost Eden of the happy times with Dorette. The fact that the new Frau Spohr was a younger sister of Carl Pfeiffer adds force to this supposition. But although Spohr and Marianne seem to have been an happy enough couple there were further family bereavements and blows to Spohr's Liberal beliefs - and there was to be no return to Eden; the Prince of Hesse-Kassel saw to that as did the further setbacks to democracy following the briefly revived hopes of 1848.

Other works of Spohr from the 1830s can also yield up variations on the interpretation offered here for the Fourth Symphony. By 1839 when Spohr wrote his Sixth Symphony "The Historical", his distaste for the

present state of things had deepened. We know the external motivation for the symphony - historical concerts were in vogue and Spohr was involved in them, but beyond telling us that Spohr tried to write in the style of different composers, commentators have failed to provide a cohesive rationale for the work. A possible interpretation is that the first movement (Bach-Handel) with its chunks of pseudo-Bach (the "Protestant counterpoint" of Sir Thomas Beecham's well-known quip) exemplifies the strong moral basis of Spohr's attitude to life and art. In the second movement (Haydn-Mozart) we may suppose that Spohr has found his "ideal state". The model of the slow movements of Mozart's 38th and 39th symphonies are too close to be coincidental. This was also the period of the "Liberal" Austrian Emperor Joseph II when the Freemasons were allowed to flourish. Mozart was Spohr's life-long idol; Spohr, like Mozart, was a Freemason, and, looking back from Metternich's Europe of 1839, the 1780s in Vienna must indeed have seemed an Edenesque period. If the first movement lays the moral base for the "ideal state" of the second, the scherzo moves into the Age of Beethoven. Critics have often noted that there is little that is Beethoven-like in the proceedings of this scherzo, but here the inspiration is surely not Beethoven's music but the idea of Beethoven as Hero. The three timpani with their three-pitch motif recall an age when people fought for their beliefs and German patriotism ran high as Napoleon's yoke was thrown off. Now, at last, the finale can make sense. For Metternich's Europe and the petty tyrants Spohr so abhorred (like his own princely employer) could only be exemplified by the bombastic, trivial and banal type of music fashionable at the period which he also stood out against. His own description of this finale as "persiflage" also fits this context. If this was indeed Spohr's inner motivation, then the title of the symphony becomes "Historical" in a more meaningful way.

Such inner motivation, once conceptualised, can be seen working in other important Spohr compositions of the period. Peter Skrine has shown how the oratorio "The Fall of Babylon" of 1840 brings to the fore once again Spohr's hatred of tyrants (1), while the "Garden of Eden" motif appears in the aria "O Zion, how bright are the hopes that attend thee" at the words "The wilderness now shall its verdure resume, the desert rejoicing, with roses shall bloom". In this oratorio the libretto allows the tyrant to be overthrown and the end to be triumphant. In the Fifth Symphony (1837), the slow introduction contains the seeds of the "ideal state" which flowers into the expansive and beautiful melody in the centre of the first movement. The stability of this, however, is undermined by fragments from the stormy first subject which eventually hurtle the music back into the recapitulation. Significantly, the big tune does not reappear and the music charges on to a rather unsettled conclusion. The magnificent slow movement gravely searches for a resolution but despite building up to an impressive climax, delicate horn calls leave the quest unfulfilled. The stamping scherzo and mellifluous trio offer a bucolic and idyllic interlude but the finale, a contrapuntal fantasia, drives relentlessly on, as if accepting life as it is, rather than an ideal state of things. The second subject turns out to be the first movement's big tune but now caught up and carried along in the drive of the finale - once again the "best times" are not recaptured. A different pattern is imposed on the Seventh Symphony "The Earthly and Divine in Human Life". Here the "World of Childhood" opening movement offers the Edenesque stage which is lost in the second movement's "Age of the Passions" with its headlong impetuosity contrasted with military march rhythms. However, in the finale, "Final Triumph of the Divine", Spohr envisages a return to an ideal state achieved through adherence to high spiritual values. Having achieved this level of resolution, the "lost Eden" pattern disappears from Spohr's music. Declining powers, revived

briefly during the inspiring progress of the 1848 révolutions, moved him towards more retrospective compositions, perhaps in a desire to repeat the triumphs of earlier days.

CONCLUSION:

Interpretations of a composer's inner motivations can never be proved as necessarily true to fact. What they have to do is to convince the listener that they are true to the music. If they prove to be so, then they offer a bridge across which the music "makes sense". The "facts" in the disputed memoirs of Shostakovich are still being argued over, yet interpretations based on them make sense of the music as heard, promoting a number of his previously disparaged works to what now appear as major statements and a coherent part of his overall oeuvre.

The contention here is that our interpretation of "The Consecration of Sound" and the decade following it also makes sense in this way, even though we cannot prove (despite the references in letters, diaries and anecdotes, as well as Spohr's personal situation) whether the composer's intentions were strictly along these lines. Verification of this thesis now lies between the listener and the music.

NOTES:

- (1) English Nightmares and German Aspirations. The Background to Spohr's "Fall of Babylon". (Spohr Journal 13 - Summer 1986 pp 2-5.)

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