

HANS GLENEWINKEL AND THE POSTHUMOUS QUARTETS

by Celia Skrine

The most valuable contribution to our knowledge about Spohr's chamber music is still the doctoral thesis written in German by Hans Glenewinkel and published in 1912 (see Keith Warsop's article in Spohr Journal 16, Summer 1989 pp 30-31). A practising musician himself, he discusses each work in turn, offering an introduction, a thematic analysis of each movement, and an overall evaluation of the work in question. His approach is a mixture of academic musical analysis, which is sound enough, and value judgments which tend to be somewhat subjective. They may also be sound, but inevitably - after nearly 80 years - need to be either corroborated or contradicted by a more up-to-date assessment.

In Paul Katow's recent monograph on "Spohr: the man and his works" (Luxembourg, 1983), we are told (p.106) that the four quartets Op.132, 141, 146 and 152 all betrayed the decline of Spohr's creative powers; and the two posthumous quartets are assumed to be of no interest and dismissed with hardly a word. So it is still to Glenewinkel that we must turn for a much more valuable and informative investigation.

Glenewinkel's approach is to examine each quartet, movement by movement. The posthumous ones are discussed both together and separately, and are usefully introduced by a quotation from the end of the autobiography (the part which was added by the composer's heirs to round off Spohr's own account) which gives the background to why Spohr decided to return to the string quartet genre at the end of his creative life, and also explains, actually more clearly than Glenewinkel in his paraphrase, why and when the composer decided not to publish his last few works.

Spohr's last successful composition was the set of six songs for baritone, violin and piano, Op.154, commissioned by the musical

director at the court of Detmold. Although Katow says their quality is nowhere near as high as that of the previous song set, Op.103, the baritone songs were greatly enjoyed, not least by the Prince at Detmold, who liked them so much that he sang them every day. Spohr himself was pleased enough with them to have them published. He sent the Prince a copy, and was rewarded with a charming letter of appreciation and a gold and pearl shirt-pin.

Glenewinkel tells us that his researches have led him to conclude that the next thing Spohr wrote after the songs Op.154 was a quartet in G minor, which he substantially rewrote in E flat major; this was intended to be his Op.155, and is known as such. He then wrote his 10th symphony, which would have been Op.156, and finally another quartet, which would have been Op.157; in fact, he was not satisfied with any of these late works and expressed the wish that none of them should ever be published. Glenewinkel agrees in the case of Op.157, but puts in a plea for Op. 155, at least in its revised version.

OP.155:

In his descriptions of each movement, the musical examples are most helpful. He pays some attention to key, form and structure, often noting deficiencies (e.g. lack of bridge passages) and observing that some themes are re-workings, sometimes almost repetitions, of ideas in earlier works, though in some cases he considers the later version to be an improvement on the earlier. He offers his own subjective impressions of the movements and his own estimation of their individual merit.

He follows his detailed analysis with a paragraph on the work's general characteristics, and here he comes up with an interesting theory. He considers that the later published quartets suffered from certain excesses: chromaticisms and sentimentality on the one hand, fussiness and therefore muddiness of texture on the other. Such criticisms are perhaps not unfamiliar in commentaries on Spohr. However, he detects in Op.155 a desire on the composer's part to break away from this manner and return to the simpler classical methods of his idols, Mozart and Cherubini. In one respect - the equal weighting of all four instruments, rather than the predominance of the first violin - Glenewinkel considers him entirely successful, and he also notes an indication of Spohr moving with the times and going in for increased use of syncopation; he admits, however, that some bad habits, especially the over-ripe harmonies, are still there. Despite the enduring beauty of expression, he finds Spohr's melodic inventiveness and mastery of form sadly reduced, and the mental energy required for proper exploitation of the themes almost absent. Reading these criticisms, one is then somewhat surprised to find that Glenewinkel still thinks the work worth resuscitating. This is because he finds that its shortcomings are no worse than those found in the Op.152 quartet, and that its greater clarity of texture is a positive improvement.

OP.157:

This is dealt with much more briefly. Glenewinkel is very enthusiastic about the slow movement, deals very cursorily with the third and fourth movements, but is gravely critical of the first for its total lack of thematic development. All in all, he says, the quartet has in more exaggerated form the failings already evident in Op.155; and he has the additional criticism to make that Spohr does not seem able to follow up his resolution to return to classical ideals of simplicity and clarity. His verdict is that Spohr was right in thinking this quartet - probably his last completed substantial composition - unworthy of him.