

HANS GLENEWINKEL: THE POSTHUMOUS QUARTETS

translated by Celia Skrine

[from Spohrs Kammermusik für Streichinstrumente. Zur Geschichte des Streichquartetts im XIX. Jahrhundert, pp.79-87; Munich, 1912]

Among the papers Spohr left behind at his death were the parts for three quartets, all in the hand of the same copyist, and all inscribed: "34th quartet for two violins etc. by L. Spohr". They are undated. One of them bears the additional indication "Work No.157". The other two seem to be different workings-out of the same material; the outer movements differ considerably from each other, whereas the middle movements show only minor differences. As mentioned already in the introductory part of this essay, Spohr's last work to be printed and given an opus number was the song set Op.154 of 1856. He went on to compose a quartet in the same year, the 10th Symphony in 1857 and after that another quartet. The details given by his heirs in the biography make it clear that after finishing these late works Spohr was not immediately dissatisfied with them, but that when he heard them performed he became convinced that they were not up to standard. Evidently he had intended at first to have them printed too, which explains the opus number given to one of the quartets. We may, however, also deduce that the only works composed between Op.154 and Op.157 - the 1856 quartet and the 10th Symphony - were intended to be given opus numbers 155 and 156. This conclusion confirms the probably correct dating of the posthumous quartets; the one which appears in two variants, henceforth to be called Op.155 for convenience, must be the earlier, written in 1856, while Op.157 dates from 1857.

Further proof of the earlier dating of Op.155 lies in the kind of paper used; a thick dark blue type identical to that used for the sketches and part fragments of the quartet Op.152 of 1855.(1)

The parts - particularly those for Op.155 - are full of mistakes and short cuts; expression marks in particular are generally omitted. The parts for second violin, viola and cello contain numerous additions, most of them in red crayon, the rest in pencil, and also direct corrections, all of which were in all probability made by Spohr himself. The fact that such additions do not occur in the first violin part entitles us to assume that Spohr himself took this part when the work was played through.

The only source of information about the genesis of these last quartets is the Autobiography (2) After an account of the enthusiastic response of a quartet-lover to Op.146 and 152, it goes on:

Spohr now determined to write another quartet (his 34th), upon terminating which he immediately opened the winter series of his still continued quartet circle with it. Although this new composition was considered extremely fresh and charming by both performers and listeners, yet he himself was so little satisfied with it, that after repeated alterations, which were rejected as soon as made, he laid aside the whole quartet as a failure; nor did he write another until a whole twelvemonth had elapsed: this differed in every respect from the former, and he substituted it for it under the same number. Upon its first performance at the quartet meeting this piece of music pleased him right well; but shortly afterwards it seemed to him to require many improvements, and as these did not turn out to his satisfaction, sorrowfully, but resigned to the consciousness that he could no longer carry out in a satisfactory manner the ideas which floated before his

fancy, he associated the new 34th quartet with that which he had previously rejected, and expressed the wish to his wife that neither should at any time be made public. (3)

[A Herr Fr. Winter wrote to Spohr saying: "Your latest creation is quite delightful; every evening that we meet to play quartets we are filled with admiration and gratitude towards you! I should so like to go into a detailed description of each movement - the charming first movement, the moving, richly harmonic Adagio, the playful, witty Scherzo with its wonderful Trio, etc..." Glenewinkel quotes this from the German version of the Autobiography and goes on to comment that this man must have been a really passionate Spohr fan to enthuse in this way. The text of this letter is not included in the English translation of the Autobiography: Translator's note]

POSTHUMOUS QUARTET IN E FLAT MAJOR (G MINOR) OP.155

As already stated, this exists in two variants, the outer movements of which are written in different keys. The G minor version is the one I consider to be the earlier, for both external and intrinsic reasons. The paper is the same as that used for Op.152; but the intrinsic reasons are even more convincing. Almost all the differences in the E flat version as opposed to the G minor are improvements and cuts. It is unnecessary to go all through them; a glance at the first movements is sufficient. The E flat quartet contains the same thematic material in the same order of presentation and treatment, indeed the same key as the G minor; but it contains an additional theme, which moves up the chord of E flat major in minims and is used to begin and end the movement; it is unthinkable that Spohr would have discarded such an enrichment. In addition to this quite convincing piece of evidence, numerous details in all the movements lend support to the view that the G minor version was the one rejected. We shall confine ourselves from now on to noting only the most important variants, and shall base our study on the E flat major version.

FIRST MOVEMENT: ALLEGRO, 4/4, E FLAT MAJOR

The movement begins with a unison theme on the E flat arpeggio. It is a slightly changed version of the opening theme of the E flat major quintet Op.33, No.1, which also begins in unison. (Ex.67) The theme is repeated on the viola (with counterpoint in the violins), after which follows a syncopated structure with a chromatic viola part and descending passages on the first violin. (Ex.68) Six bars later the third theme makes its appearance, beginning with a march-like, emphatic phrase but continuing in softer vein. (Ex.69) The first bar has the most important role to play as regards the exploration of motifs; this too is an old acquaintance, for it is used as a secondary figure in the C major quartet, Op.45 in the same rhythm but with a slightly different top line. These three themes complete the material of the movement.

The exposition begins with the introductory motif in the bass, but this then disappears from the discussion, only reappearing at the end of the development section and in the coda, where it is heard on top, with the other instruments providing polyphonic support. The main argument of the movement is formed by a constant rivalry between the restless syncopated theme and the firm rhythm of the third theme, which dominate the development section. In the third section the introductory theme is completely absent, which is explained by the fact that it was an after-thought; this must also explain the deviation from the normal rules regarding key relationships. The original key of G minor makes its presence felt throughout, despite the superimposed key of E flat, and considerably disturbs the tonal unity.

There is a striking lack of bridge passages, so much so that there is

not a bar or even a note that is not directly derived from the themes. This may be an advantage, but it also carries with it a risk of monotony. The first theme is not fully exploited, the second does not lend itself to being thematically broken down, so that the third theme is repeated rather to excess, particularly as it is not taken to pieces either, but simply transposed and restated in various pitches and harmonies. A certain sterility is therefore unmistakable.

Despite these shortcomings, this movement is of decidedly greater merit than the opening movement of Op.152, for reasons which apply equally to the remaining movements; they are therefore better discussed at the end. Here, however, mention must be made of the unusually prominent element of syncopation.

Looking for the sake of comparison at the first version, in G minor, we see that it begins immediately with the syncopated theme but treats it at significantly greater length, before the second (third) theme, here in A minor, is introduced. Furthermore it is neither richer nor poorer than in the E flat major version (disregarding the theme in E flat, of course); it simply presents the material in slightly different permutations and with greater clarity. The movement ends in G major, in a formula already used by Spohr in the finale of Op.136, which is clearly influenced by the "new Romantics". (Ex.70)

SECOND MOVEMENT: ROMANZE, 6/8, B FLAT MAJOR

As its title indicates, this movement is song-like, and consists of two eight-bar phrases separated by an intermediary phrase, also of eight bars. After the repetition of the main phrase a short coda is appended. In this extremely tight form the vital element is the melodic core. In character it offers no point of comparison with earlier movements. (Ex. 71) This touchingly simple tune has a gentle charm and miraculous serenity. As regards the harmony, a "modern" seventh chord on the strong beat of the bar attracts attention, as does the sustained chord at the end, with its changing harmonies. (Ex.72 & 73) In the earlier version the ending is in a more traditional style; the upper voice holds a B flat while the middle voices play parallel sixths. The remaining differences are of a secondary nature apart from the fact that this movement is the third movement of the earlier version, and the name "Romanze" is absent.

THIRD MOVEMENT: MENUETTO, MODERATO, 3/4, G MAJOR

This movement too is simple and straightforward, built up mainly on the upward leap of a fifth. The Haydnesque shortness of the notes is not characteristic of Spohr. (Ex.74) The Trio contains more of the familiar hallmarks of Spohr's style.

The relationship between the older and newer versions is the same as in the Romanze. In the earlier version the movement is called a Scherzo, marked Allegro ben moderato. It is probably true to say that its character is actually on the borderline between the two, though when it is played more slowly, in accordance with the metronome mark, the minuet character prevails.

FOURTH MOVEMENT: ALLEGRO NON TROPPO, 4/4, E FLAT MAJOR

This movement has just one theme, a passage descending turbulently over the steps of the major tonic triad. (Ex.75) Often the flow of the roulades is interrupted by interpolated crotchets, but these never form a counter-subject. The work on the motifs of the theme - sequences, transpositions, strettos and imitations - takes up the whole movement; it is done with such mastery that the listener never tires of it, and an impression of freshness remains. The movement is not an important one but neither is it boring. Another feature to note is a melodic formul-

-ation in the concluding bars, interesting because of the augmented triads. (Ex.76) In the earlier version this movement is in G major, and the name "Finale" is missing; the tempo indication is simply Allegro. It uses the same material but noticeably differently arranged. Much of it is weaker, but much is actually more successful, as in the E flat major quartet; an example is the coda, in which the rolling motion is slowed down by stages.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

Musically speaking, there is an enormous gulf between this quartet and its last predecessor; greater than between other quartets written within a short time of each other. We have no information as to how Spohr himself judged his last printed quartets; but this posthumous work seems to prove that he clearly recognised their limitations and decided to embark on a radical reform of his style. The later published quartets contained elements which were hard to accept; all too often the chromaticism was overworked, the arabesque-like figures disproportionate, the harmony artificial, they were overladen with synthetically constructed counter-voices which lacked inner life, and there were melodies of a sentimental superficiality which would have been more suited to the salon than to chamber music. All this Spohr now determinedly rooted out. Instead he obviously took as models the quartets of his idols Mozart and Cherubini, making his guiding principle the return to the classical ideals of his youth. In one respect, that of structure, he attained his ideal. The quartet is successfully classical in style. No longer does the first violin predominate; not a single virtuosic flourish is to be found. The principle of the equal weighting of all the instruments is paramount throughout the outer movements, and is adhered to in the more homophonic inner ones too so far as practicable.

As to the harmony, Spohr could not change out of all recognition, and he was still writing a great deal of chromaticism, but the energy with which he attempted to burst the bonds of mannerism is still evident. He had reined in his predilection for pedal points and for confused, turgid harmonies. There are even certain features, such as secondary seventh chords, which indicate a move forward in the direction of the new Romanticism which had taken such a powerful hold in the 1850s; his increasing use of syncopation is also forward-looking. A significant innovation may also be seen in the unaccustomed clarity and transparency of his writing. He has cast aside his tendency to overburden his writing with counter-melodies, twiddly bits, finicky rhythmic details melting away unchecked; yet the polyphony does not suffer. Because of the greater simplicity, the piece does not make such enormous technical demands of the performers as his earlier work.

The formal shortcomings of the first movement have been discussed above; these strictures do not apply to the other movements. The listener is struck by the extraordinary concision of the layout, which keeps within almost the same limits as Op.4 No.1. Thematically it is noticeable that Spohr has turned his back on his previous method of shaping melody. Gone are the tortuous lines, and, as in his Vienna period, Spohr again prefers to use a firm diatonicism; his themes are sane and robust. His creative imagination was, however, no longer able to produce new and original thoughts. His ideas are partly common property, partly derived from his own earlier works. In those cases where he did manage to get his imagination to produce something new, as in the Romanze, the listener is captivated by the music's gentle radiance and immensely benign expression, which reflect the personality of the composer.

The skill, or perhaps one should call it the routine, of shedding light from various angles on a theme, did not desert Spohr. But he had become increasingly impotent to conjure new organic development out of his

themes. He became incapable of dissecting themes and changing their character. This is the quartet's most noticeable shortcoming and is probably - together with the drying-up of his inventive flow - the reason why he did not consider this late quartet as being worthy of him.

These weaknesses, however, were already becoming very noticeable in Op.152; and the quartet Op.155 possesses so many merits in its transparency and more natural language that, in my opinion, it surpasses its predecessor in overall merit.

POSTHUMOUS QUARTET IN G MINOR OP.157

FIRST MOVEMENT: ALLEGRO, 4/4, G MINOR

(Ex.77) This theme, the last of many elegiac G minor themes, is typical of them both in its overall design and in its emotional content. The only new feature is the persistent syncopation. Like the first movement of the previous work, this movement also lacks bridge passages and the first statement of the section is followed immediately by the development of the theme, which consists mainly of imitation. A bass figure derived from it is fairly successful in helping the composer to heighten the tension. The second theme, following on the first, is an innocuous melody in B flat major. (Ex.78) This is given to the second violin in the repeat, while the first plays decorations above it, which then - in traditional style - become briefly autonomous, ending with a cadence-like trill. The composer seems to lack the energy to write a development, and the recapitulation is followed immediately by a repetition of the first part, in which the lower parts are changed. This grave defect - the same material being used unaltered three times in succession - is all the more regrettable because the movement is richer in contrasts than the first movement of the previous quartet and the handling of the first subject shows a greater compositional competence. Stylistically, meanwhile, this quartet remains inferior to the other.

SECOND MOVEMENT: LARGHETTO, 6/8, E FLAT MAJOR

The theme is taken note for note from the Larghetto of Op.93, with only the rhythm of the bass changed; however, the gentle character of the earlier version is replaced by a firmer stance. (Ex.79) The texture of the middle voices is also altered to advantage from its handling in Op.93. In the central section a rather more animated passage is followed by a beautiful, dreamy episode which sounds almost like a pre-echo of Grieg. (Ex.80) The movement is masterly as regards both content and form, easily superior to most of the slow movements of Spohr's later period, e.g. those in Opp.141, 144 and 152.

THIRD MOVEMENT: MENUETTO, 3/4, G MINOR

The theme is vigorous, characterised by its ornaments; many of the notes are preceded by one or more grace notes. (Ex.81) In the Trio (Un poco piu moderato, G major) the major theme from the finale of the E minor quintet reappears, with the modification imposed by the change in time-signature. However, its effect is far less fresh than in the earlier work, chiefly because of the rather monotonous pizzicato accompaniment on the cello.

FOURTH MOVEMENT: FINALE. ALLEGRO MOLTO, 9/8, G MINOR

The rhythm of the principal theme is maintained without a break throughout the movement, constantly passing from instrument to instrument. (Ex.82) The consequent monotony is relieved by a few piquant moments: the unexpected, spontaneous dissonance right at the beginning and the welcome interruption of the restless motion by the broader sweep of the second theme, which is reminiscent of a passage in the Andante of

Schubert's Great C major symphony. (Ex.83) A third motif follows immediately, introducing a Ländler-like melody in thirds in the main rhythm of the movement. The overall structure is that of sonata form, but with some deviations, including the fact that the development section is limited to a few bars.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

In this last quartet Spohr was clearly not able to carry on in the new direction he had taken, let alone make progress in it. He did keep hold of several of the reforms he had made, for instance the clarity of the structure, and the avoidance of over-ripe harmonies and the blurred rhythms. The other improvements appear somewhat watered down, and the shortcomings are more in evidence. The piece is not in the best chamber-music style like the previous quartet; the first violin is often allowed to dominate completely, indeed at one point in the first movement it assumes the role of soloist, though only briefly. As regards the harmony, there is no indication of the fact that a wind of change was blowing; quite the contrary: the old Spohrisms are to the fore again, as strong as ever; the fondness for pedal points in the bass, the heaped chromaticisms. As regards form, only the middle movements are beyond reproach; in the others the atrophy of the development sections is an unmistakable pointer to the demise of the composer's power to handle form. Invention does flow more freely although there are frequent echoes of earlier compositions.

Within these limits, the Larghetto is incontestably an outstanding piece. The other movements do suffer all the more from the weaknesses outlined, and even though individual passages contain many beautiful moments, the work as a whole would not be able to withstand the glare of publicity. It is much easier to understand Spohr's decision in the case of this quartet than in that of the other.

NOTES

- (1) We may deduce from this that the copyist's paper was provided by Spohr
- (2) II, 378. (II, 322 in 1864 English translation.)
- (3) Now that more than fifty years have passed since Spohr's death, and now that even his best works are more or less ignored by the rising generation, it is surely no mark of disrespect to disregard his wishes concerning it, especially as these quartets represent a new phase, and their quality is equal, if not superior, to that of his other late quartets

MUSICAL EXAMPLES



68.

Musical score for measures 68-69. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). It contains a melodic line with various dynamics: *p*, *cresc.*, *f*, *dim.*, and *p u.s.f.*. The lower staff is in bass clef with the same key signature, containing a bass line with dynamics *fz*, *f pizz.*, *p*, and *arco*. There are also some handwritten annotations like *fz* and *f* in the lower staff.

69.

Musical score for measures 69-70. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats. It contains a melodic line with dynamics *p* and *fz*. The lower staff is in bass clef with the same key signature, containing a bass line with dynamics *p* and *fz*. There are also some handwritten annotations like *fz* and *f* in the lower staff.

70.

Musical score for measures 70-71. The system consists of three staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats. It contains a melodic line with dynamics *f* and *mf*. The middle staff is in bass clef with the same key signature, containing a bass line with dynamics *p* and *mf*. The lower staff is labeled *Br.* and *Vc.* and contains a bass line with dynamics *p* and *mf*. There are also some handwritten annotations like *cresc.* and *mf* in the lower staff.

71.

Musical score for measures 71-72. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats. It contains a melodic line with dynamics *pp* and *p*. The lower staff is in bass clef with the same key signature, containing a bass line with dynamics *pp* and *p*.

72.

73.

74.

75.

76.

77.

78. *sol.*

Musical score for measures 78-79. The score is written for two staves (treble and bass clefs). Measure 78 begins with a *sol.* marking. The music features melodic lines with slurs and dynamic markings of *p* and *cresc.*. Measure 79 continues the melodic development with similar dynamics.

79.

Musical score for measures 79-80. The score is written for two staves. Measure 79 continues the melodic lines from the previous system. Measure 80 shows a continuation of the melodic and harmonic material with dynamic markings of *p*.

80.

Musical score for measures 80-81. The score is written for two staves. Measure 80 features a variety of dynamic markings including *pp*, *f*, *p*, and *cresc.*. Measure 81 continues with dynamics of *f* and *p*.

81.

Musical score for measures 81-82. The score is written for two staves. Measure 81 features a variety of dynamic markings including *f* and *p*. Measure 82 continues with dynamics of *f* and *p*.

82.

Musical score for measures 82-85. The score consists of four staves. The top staff is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The music is in a minor key. The first staff has a dynamic marking of *f* at the beginning. The second staff has a dynamic marking of *f* at the beginning and *f* at the end. The third staff has a dynamic marking of *f* at the beginning and *f* at the end. The fourth staff has a dynamic marking of *f* at the beginning and *p* at the end. There are various musical notations including notes, rests, and slurs.

83.

Musical score for measures 86-90. The score consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The music is in a minor key. The first staff has a dynamic marking of *pp* at the beginning and *cresc.* in the middle. The second staff has a dynamic marking of *pp* at the beginning and *p* at the end. There are various musical notations including notes, rests, and slurs.

Musical score for measures 91-93. The score consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The music is in a minor key. The first staff has a dynamic marking of *pp* at the beginning and *dim.* in the middle. The second staff has a dynamic marking of *p* at the end. There are various musical notations including notes, rests, and slurs.