

THE SHADOW OF BEETHOVEN

The Problem of the Scherzo in Spohr's Third Symphony

By Keith Warsop

The Scherzo of Spohr's Symphony No.3 in C minor, Op.78 has always been a problematic movement. The preface to the Bärenreiter miniature score edited by Horst Heussner (TP27, published 1957) says: "The third movement, an Allegro split up into many individual sections, is less significant and convincing [than the other movements]. Its lack of inner tension makes it appear monotonous in performance, and the Trio, with its chromatic effects, is also without an effective climax." (English text Page XII).

For the recording of the symphony performed by the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Gerd Albrecht and issued on Schwann long playing record VMS1626 in 1984 (later on CD 11620), the sleeve note by Ekkehart Kroher, translated by Celia Skrine, is also critical: "The same [the best thing of its kind that he had ever written] could not be said of the C minor Scherzo which follows, even if one does not take Beethoven's scherzi as a yardstick and disregards Schumann's dictum that 'scherzos are not Spohr's strong point.' The Scherzo does unmistakably speak with Spohr's own voice, however, and avoids quirkiness in favour of sincerity. This is perhaps why the Trio is not sufficiently contrasted with the Scherzo itself, despite its chromatic harmonies and lively instrumentation."

In reviewing this recording in the magazine *Gramophone* (Volume 62, Number 738, Page 612, November 1984) John Warrack stated: "If the scherzo is less distinctive, that is perhaps because Spohr could not really find a way out of Beethoven's shadow at this point; with due respect for Spohr's memory, I would venture to suggest that this is really a three-movement symphony with a superfluous scherzo."

Lest it be thought that the conductor Gerd Albrecht is being singled out here for criticism, it must be said that other modern commercial recordings of the symphony also fail to interpret the scherzo convincingly (RBM Musikproduktion LP RBM3035: Southwest German Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Tamás Sulyok; Amati CD SRR8904/1: Southwest German Radio Symphony Orchestra Baden Baden conducted by Leopold Hager).

In addition, Clive Brown (*Louis Spohr: A Critical Biography*, Cambridge UP 1984, Page 137), in an otherwise detailed analysis of the symphony, rather skates over the scherzo in non-committal fashion, saying merely: "The Scherzo (C minor 6/4) is more restless than playful and never quite attains a climax. In the Trio (C major) the wind instruments cavort capriciously with charming effect."

Our own feeling is that the trouble lies not in the scherzo itself but in the attempt by conductors to make the movement resemble the standard scherzo model of classical tradition with its clearly defined points of climax.

Spohr's first two symphonies (1811 and 1820) were isolated events in the first half of his composing career, both being the result of commissions. It was not until December 1827 that Spohr began work on the Third Symphony at the close of the year in which Beethoven had died. It is a commonplace of music criticism that the symphonies of Beethoven cast a large shadow over his successors and that, in contrast to the 18th century composer who could turn out sets of symphonies by the yard, the 19th century composer was all the time aware that, after Beethoven, the symphony was judged by the most exacting of standards.

Is it fanciful to consider Spohr as probably the first composer of repute to feel this pressure? After the wide intervals between his earlier symphonies, it is interesting to speculate on his return to the form so soon after Beethoven's death. Whether that event lifted a psychological barrier or whether Spohr felt that it was now up to him to carry the symphonic torch for German music cannot, of course, be confirmed. Perhaps the correct interpretation is a combination of both.

There is also the possibility that Spohr was deliberately invoking "the shadow of Beethoven." The Scherzo opens with a reminiscence of the scherzo from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony — perhaps meant as a tribute from Spohr to the memory of the friend of his Vienna period, for we know how much he admired this movement. When Spohr's comments on the Fifth Symphony are extracted from his Autobiography, only the criticisms are usually given so it is easy to forget what he wrote in praise of this movement: "The Scherzo is highly original and of real romantic colouring ... The return of the Scherzo at this point [of the finale] is so happy an idea that the composer may be envied for it. Its effect is most captivating."

Overall, to us, Spohr's Scherzo seems like a musical equivalent to a "fantasie-stück" by a German Romantic writer such as E. T. A. Hoffmann or Jean Paul (Spohr was friendly with both men). There are no clear-cut climaxes; instead half-lights and subdued dynamics hold sway (only the final bar is played fortissimo). Perhaps a conductor would do well to bear in mind the instruction "Schattenhaft" which Mahler gave to some of his spectral scherzos. Furthermore, the world of Hoffmann and Jean Paul is close to that of German Romantic opera in the 1820s (indeed, Hoffmann's own earlier opera, *Undine*, was a key work in the development of this genre). Spohr's own operas at this stage of his career are full of supernatural happenings. *Der Berggeist*, *Pietro von Abano* and *Der Alchymist* all contain music which could be paralleled in the Scherzo. We are not suggesting that Spohr had an actual supernatural story in mind for this Scherzo; merely that an intention to get away from the conventional type led him to write the sort of music which would not have been out of place in a "Zauber-Oper". With this interpretation, the wind-dominated Trio would blow away the trolls or

goblins and show the happier side of German folklore, the "happy, smiling youth setting out through the forest" type of story (We could also point out that about the same time, the young Mendelssohn was writing his "fairy" scherzos, which also often lack real climaxes although their absence has never been criticised).

We had formulated all of the above before it occurred suddenly to us that there is a famous description of a performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in E. M. Forster's novel *Howard's End* in which one character exactly imagines goblins entering the music: "'look out for the part where you think you have done with the goblins and they come back,' breathed Helen." And Spohr said of just this moment: "The return of the Scherzo at this part is so happy an idea that the composer may be envied for it." Beethoven's Scherzo and goblins; Spohr's Scherzo and E. T. A. Hoffmann; the links may be closer than we suppose. Now the challenge is for a conductor to make this movement come to life for us and prove that Spohr after all had got it right.