

TOURING WITH SPOHR

By Malcolm Latchem

(of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble)

I first became aware of the Spohr Society of Great Britain in early 1983 when I spotted the composer's name on a screwed up piece of paper discarded in the Academy of St Martin in the Fields office wastepaper basket. I promptly salvaged the leaflet which was a well-timed circular sent out by the Society to remind musical organisations of the pending bicentenary of Spohr.

This was the beginning of a happy relationship with the Society. We received great encouragement and invaluable financial help from the Society's Record Fund in order to record all four Double Quartets with Hyperion. Fortunately, the wastepaper basket serendipity gave me time to include Spohr's Second Double Quartet in E flat major, Op.77 in our concert in New York's Carnegie Hall on the exact date of the bicentenary, April 5, 1984. We were also able to celebrate at the Queen Elizabeth Hall by dedicating our three concerts of the season to Spohr and, of course, including his works.

Unlike string quartets, who can draw upon a repertoire of more than 500 well-known and loved "masterpieces", the Chamber Ensemble has discovered some 16 string octets only and an equal number of sextets. We have commissioned two new octets, by Richard Rodney Bennett and John Woolrich, which makes a total of 18 octets.

It is easy to understand that during the first 12 years of the Ensemble the only works performed were Mendelssohn's Octet, the two Brahms' sextets and Schubert's two-cello Quintet. Concert Societies were happy to provide audiences with music they already knew and loved.

When I took over the task of managing the Chamber Ensemble in 1979 I was able to pursue the important aspect of enlarging our repertoire. By the way, I am the second violinist of the ensemble and it is interesting to note how often "management" of chamber groups, quartets etc, is taken on by an inner part player — very often the violist.

I had discovered Spohr's First Double Quartet in D minor, Op.65 in Dartington College of Arts Library and had read this through with the students. An ideal work for students as the parts for the second quartet in Op.65 are that little bit easier. By 1981 we were performing Op.65 in Germany, Switzerland, the United States and Norway. I had also tracked down the other three double quartets — not an easy job as none were in print. So Spohr was no stranger to us when I spotted his name in the wastepaper basket!

The perpetual problem for concert societies is to programme music or composers which are not known to the general public. Time after time we had offered Spohr, only to be requested for something "better known." Mendelssohn's Octet, written when he was only 16 is, of course, a "masterpiece", and maybe names like Svendsen, Raff, Milhaud, Gade and Enesco do not immediately fill the societies' sponsors with delight. But we have persevered and audiences have responded with appreciation to the charm or warmth of the new (for them) music. Enesco's Octet in C, Op.7 (written when he was only 19) was hailed by three independent critics as a masterpiece when we performed it in the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

Some years ago, the Ensemble was asked to give four concerts in the Castle Hotel, Taunton, at a weekend of music and food. The final scheme was to increase the size of the Ensemble gradually (thus saving money!). Programme 1: Quintets; Programmes 2 and 3: Sextets; Programme 4: Octets — Spohr Double Quartet in E flat, Op.77, Raff Octet Op.178, Mendelssohn Octet, Op.20.

The room where we performed was very small, holding 40 armchairs and sofas for the well-fed audience, sitting close enough to have to dodge the occasional enthusiastic bow stroke.

In this atmosphere, the Spohr was a smash hit. When we returned to the West Country the following year to give six concerts — all the societies had requested Spohr! Some of the organisers had been at Taunton and word had got around. The "concert halls" proved to be either small churches or school gymnasiums or disused cinemas, small intimate halls, and the real chamber music aspect of Spohr's music was appreciated by all. Minehead in North Devon asked us back again two years later as long as we would play more Spohr. We played Op.65, Svendsen Octet in A, Op.3 and Martin's Sextet. All unknown? The hall was packed and the audience delighted with the "new" music!

It is not always easy to conjure up the homely atmosphere portrayed in that lovely print of Spohr playing chamber music with friends in his home. On several occasions in large halls we did not achieve this. For example, to an audience of 500 in a hall that held 3,500 in Ithaca, New York State, though we were assured that this was a record attendance for chamber music and that the ripple of applause was appreciative.

Of course, the problems of bad acoustics, brittle atmosphere and distance from the audience is universal. It was therefore refreshing to discover that the new chamber music hall in the Philharmonic complex in Berlin is an excellent shape and has a good acoustic: Spohr sounded well there.

A few days after the Carnegie Hall bicentenary concert we were to rehearse at the New York flat of a friend of our leader, Kenneth Sillito. A surprise awaited us, for this turned out to be the Park Avenue apartment of Dr Bernard Jacobs, an overseas member of the Spohr Society. Dr Jacobs' collection of music included copies of every published string quartet by Spohr. We were to meet the next day a musician friend of Dr Jacobs, Irwin Polk, who possesses a violin bow designed and used by Spohr. The bow is some four inches longer than a normal one. The knowledge of this "abnormality" immediately made sense of those many long, fluid quaver passages in Spohr's music, which are usually indicated to be played in one impossibly long bow stroke. Impossible, that is, for us lesser (or smaller) mortals.

Of course, present-day touring cannot equal the hardships and length of time endured in the travels of the great musicians and artists of the 18th and 19th centuries. The worst aspect today is the so-called "jet lag", or maybe just trying to fit too much travel and too many concerts into too short a time.

Arriving in, say, the United States one day; rehearsing the next; it still feels like 2.00 am as one walks onto the platform to give a concert on the third day.

On one occasion we had finished a concert in Athens, Ohio, at 10.30 pm and were driving in two cars to Columbus Airport in order to report for a flight to Los Angeles at 6.00 am. The drivers were myself and Roger Garland (third violinist); we were driving in true British tradition — exceeding 80 mph. A local diligent policeman spotted us and, as our hired cars exhibited Miami number plates, he immediately growled that we were "under arrest." The moment we spoke with our "quaint" English accents his whole attitude changed. Ohio had a new governor who had increased law enforcement. We had Miami number plates and, of course "no one in Miami obeyed the law." Credit cards were produced, fines paid and we went sedately on our way. That night we had only three hours in bed.

On another occasion we decided to drive 650 miles on a day with no concert. Roger Garland, whose hobby is to drive around racetracks at high speed, set off first. The two cellists left next and I departed last as usual. We were driving through South and North Carolina, Maryland and the North. I was relating to my passengers the Ohio police story when the flashing blue lights appeared behind us again. I went to sit in the police car and the more friendly police officer took my licence, smiled and said: "Malcolm — do you know Roger?" Roger had been going faster than I.

The rest of the journey was spent restfully driving at 55 mph. But on hearing that we were members of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, the policeman had not fined us — but wished us well.

We will continue to play Spohr and will soon perform and record the Nonet and the Octet for wind and strings. We will continue to play Spohr in halls large or small anywhere in the world. Spohr was specific about how the two quartets should sit on stage. But sometimes available space decides how we should sit, such as in a straight line in a church in Somerset, or face-to-face four-by-four in another church in Devon. But the Sunday afternoon play-through with friends for pure enjoyment is still to be recommended.