

# THE COMPLETE SPOHR - A PROBLEM IN MUSICAL ETHICS

By Keith Warsop

"All the indications point upwards for Spohr ... If there were shares available I would be a heavy buyer ... his clarinet concertos alone ... have *Four Seasons* potential ... Spohr's voice was not that of a pleasant minor composer or even of the super technician he certainly was. My own guess is that a further decade's exposure of the opus-mountain of the Kassel Konzertmeister will establish a ranking a little below Haydn and Mendelssohn, but in their company and of it."

— Edward Pearce in *Classic CD*, July 1991

Spohr Society members who have been with us since our early days will recall how strongly we emphasised the point that only Spohr's best works should be performed and recorded; that we did not wish to see the day when such compositions as the *Historical Symphony* or the *Reise Sonata* figured regularly in programmes — these works could only do harm in estimating Spohr at his true worth.

At that time we also listed those works which, by common consent of Spohr scholars who had toiled long in this field were his outstanding contributions to music and, therefore, were at the top of our list of performing and recording priorities (these included Fifth Symphony, Seventh Violin Concerto, Second and Fourth Clarinet Concertos, Third and

Fourth Double Quartets, String Sextet, String Quintet in B minor, Op.69, String Quartets Op.29, No. 1 and Op.74, No.3, the *Alchemist* and *Macbeth* overtures, selected lieder, and, to a lesser extent, some of the piano trios and violin duos).

Yet here we are 20 years on with the prospect of numerous Spohr cycles, some already in progress and others planned, threatening to put almost the complete Spohr on record, including many of those less-inspired works which, we felt, could only harm his reputation.

How has this almost complete turnaround come about? A hard and almost hopeless battle to get a handful of Spohr's supreme masterpieces recorded has suddenly breached the barricades so successfully that many of the definitely un supreme non-masterpieces are pouring through the opening too.

Firstly, we can point to the fact that those important works of Spohr which have been successfully recorded, such as the clarinet concertos or the double quartets, have whetted the appetites of many for more Spohr. In other words, a market is slowly being created — as the extracts quoted above from a column in a record review magazine make clear.

Secondly, there is the development of music into commercial "sound archives", available to the public in the form of complete recorded editions — witness the output of Mozart material in this bicentenary year, even extending to most of the fragmentary works which have survived.

Already this tendency had developed in the later 1960s. The Deutsche Grammophon Beethoven Edition of 1970 showed the marketing experts that purchasers were waiting. During the 1970s such projects as the complete Haydn symphonies and string quartets proved highly successful. Later, the complete Dvořák string quartets, for instance, showed to what lengths it was possible to go in producing archive material on record. At least three of these quartets were completed when Dvořák was suppressing his own natural musical instincts in an attempt to import Wagnerian and Lisztian principles into the quartet. These works are of extreme length (one lasts a few seconds under 70 minutes) and only survived at all through the discovery of early sets of parts as Dvořák had destroyed the scores. Only the scholar, the profound Dvořák enthusiast or the collector who must have no gaps in a set of works (as if they were cigarette cards or stamp issues) would really want these three quartets. Later in the 1970s such releases as the complete music for violin and orchestra by Max Bruch or the complete piano trios of Haydn (some 45 works) in one boxed set showed the extent of the market for such compilations.

Although such bulk packaging had its critics, there was also a contrary view: that just as one might have in one's personal library the complete novels of Dickens or Scott or Balzac or Tolstoy (which would, of course, include some of their lesser inspired productions) without feeling it necessary to re-read them every few months, so it was possible to have the equivalent in one's record collection — the complete concertos of A-B-C or the complete works of X-Y-Z — without needing to listen to them with any frequency.

The economics of the CD age have accelerated this process towards "complete cycles." While the industry's major record companies re-cycle the standard classics again and again, and go to ever extreme lengths in marketing the "star quality" of their artists, the smaller independent firms (such as, in Britain, Hyperion, Chandos and CRD) are forced to look elsewhere to survive. There are three main areas available to them: discovering new talent; recording rare repertoire; and recording contemporary music.

While CDs are being bought at such a pace, the demand for recording material will intensify. There is a limit to which the smaller companies can go in promoting their artists. At a certain point these artists attain a level of fame which attracts the major companies with their more lucrative contracts. With contemporary music the market is limited, but with rare repertoire of the past the well is bottomless with the added incentive that one day a company might "hit the jackpot" and unearth a composer who repeats the Vivaldi phenomenon by becoming wildly popular. Another attraction for tackling rare repertoire is that the major companies are unlikely to step in by deciding to record, say, the complete symphonies of Nikolai Miaskovsky — or Havergal Brian — or Walter Piston — or Alan Hovhaness — or Anton Rubinstein — or Joachim Raff — or Louis Spohr.

Which brings us neatly back to the subject of our discussion and the role of both ourselves and the Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft at Kassel in this explosion of interest in Spohr's music. Now that the recording companies need the repertoire they often need help in locating the performance material or guidance for ideas of which music to record. Had this need arisen in the early 1960s we would have had no trouble in guiding them to our list of Spohr's best works and making sure that they ignored the others; but today it is too late to do this. Marketing research shows that the "one-off" record of rare repertoire often sinks without trace; only a series of issues (such as the complete symphonies or string quartets) can keep up the pressure on the collector. Even when a record company accepts our suggestions as to recording Spohr's best works, they immediately want to go on to record the remaining compositions in that particular cycle. Of course, we could withhold our help but that would involve throwing out the baby with the bathwater — the companies would leave Spohr and ourselves to get on with it and switch their interest to another composer. If that happened, we would be left without the recordings of his best works which we desire. Even if a company decided to go ahead with a Spohr project after we had declined to help, they might do less justice to the composer than if we accepted a watching brief.

One short example will suffice: when Marco Polo decided to record Spohr's First Symphony we were able to bring to their attention the composer's decision to omit the repeats in the Scherzo as, on reflection, he decided that otherwise the movement was too long. This advice was followed in the recording.

There is an interesting sidelight on the tendency towards recording "the complete Spohr". Scholars have often remarked on Spohr's Janus-faced position in musical history — partly looking back to the classics (especially in his loyalty to rounded forms and balanced periods) and partly looking ahead to the romantics (harmonies; orchestration; programmes; experimental ensembles). What has not been noticed is that Spohr occupies a similar ambiguous position with regard to the classification of composers into "great" and "minor masters". To explain: When a minor master such as Hummel writes a piano concerto we know that it will have a stirring and tuneful opening for orchestra alone, leading to a dramatic or poetic entry by the soloist; that the central section of the movement will be partly development and partly free fantasia; that the reprise will be regular and will lead to a cadenza. One hardly has to think about Hummel's concerto forms — just enjoy the music they contain. It is different with Mozart or Beethoven. One can, of course, enjoy their music on the Hummel level but it is clear that the intellectual rigour they have brought to the concerto form is all the time arousing, defeating, altering or confirming expectations; that everything coheres rather than being only a pleasant succession of musical events.

In this area, Spohr is closer to Mozart and Beethoven than to Hummel. In such first movements as those to the Second, Third, Fifth, Seventh, Ninth, Tenth and Eleventh violin concertos and the clarinet concertos this is abundantly clear. But Spohr also has a foot in the camp of the "minor masters" and this shows through in some of the finales to those same concertos — for instance the Ninth and Eleventh violin concertos are surely of this calibre whereas the Second and Fourth clarinet concerto finales maintain the standard of their first movements. But the technical level of Spohr's music is always that of a great composer — the manoeuvres within his music, so to speak — and that brings us back to the main thread of our thought. Many performers who become involved with Spohr find that this technical perfection is almost an attraction in its own right and so, once more, we have an incentive to want to go on to perform "the complete Spohr" — to record more of Spohr than is perhaps good for him.

We have covered a lot of ground from our opening position of wishing to have only Spohr's best works performed or recorded. Let us affirm here that this is still our desire. But it is too late to make that position an effective one. History has moved on to the stage when the mass exhumation of Spohr's music is already under way. However, when the Spohr recorded archive is for all practical purposes complete, then the selection of the best can again be the rule for future recordings. Only, perhaps, the definition of "the best" will have been extended to include a number of works which we would never have come to appreciate but for "the complete Spohr". For we must not forget that among the unsung works already revived a few masterpieces have surfaced which would otherwise have lain in obscurity; for instance the string quartets, Op.29, No.2 and Op.84, No.2 and the Harp Trio to name but three. Let us hope there are more such surprises in store as "the complete Spohr" is unveiled.