

# THE HISTORICAL SYMPHONY REVISITED

## With a note on its relationship to the Concert Overture Op.126 "im ernsten Styl"

by Keith Warsop

SPOHR'S Historical Symphony has been written off as a disaster many times, right back to the year of its first performance and yet despite such brickbats it obstinately refuses to go away.

The British premiere at the Philharmonic Society concert of Monday April 6, 1840 conducted by Sir George Smart was greeted by hisses from the audience after the notorious finale in the style of "the very latest period – the newest of the new." Yet nine years later it was revived under the baton of Michael Costa to another cool reception and, nothing daunted, Costa conducted the symphony again in 1853<sup>1</sup>.

The same story could be told elsewhere and in our own times it was the Spohr symphony chosen by the BBC to broadcast in October 1959 as part of programmes to mark the centenary of the composer's death. Again, at the time of the bicentenary of Spohr's birth in 1984, a recording appeared and not long afterwards another BBC orchestra revived it in a further broadcast. Now, as part of a project to record all of Spohr's symphonies, a CD of the Historical has just been released<sup>2</sup>.

So what is it about this infuriating symphony that proves so perennially enticing? Certainly, it must be admitted that Spohr invested it with the utmost in curiosity value by his choice of both form and content. Had the symphony contained only pastiches of its nominated composers's styles, as some critics have maintained, or had it been merely a recycling of Spohr's own compositional mannerisms as others have claimed, it would have been left in the lumber room.

No, the fascination of the Historical is precisely that curious balance which Spohr somehow achieved by embedding the

pastiche within the Spohrish mannerisms. This is not to say that fascination with the symphony necessarily makes it a successful work of art.

Robert Schumann is the most notable of those critics who felt that the symphony failed precisely because it reflected Spohr's own artistic personality too thoroughly. He said: "Everything he wrote was stamped with his peculiar expression...indeed, he could not disguise himself."<sup>3</sup>

Clive Brown, one of today's leading Spohr scholars, feels that Spohr was not attempting to counterfeit Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven but did enough to invoke these composers. "The different movements are not accurate stylistic imitations, though the intentions are made clear by the use of characteristic stylistic devices or direct allusions to the music of the composers concerned."<sup>4</sup>

Joshua Berrett, after laying down a criterion with which Schumann would presumably have agreed – "How close does he come in emulating the styles of the composers at the specified points in time?" – finds that Spohr does not meet it. He says: "These movements can no more be regarded as examples of authenticity or stylistic fidelity to what the composer-models were writing at that specific time than any number of other works that purport to evoke the ambience of an earlier time."<sup>5</sup>

But Dr Berrett decides that after all this is not important for "Spohr is ultimately most successful in evoking the ambience of his predecessors, regardless of what these evocations may lack in stylistic authenticity."

It is our view that it is precisely this evocation of "the ambience of his predecessors" by the use of "characteristic stylistic devices or direct allusions to the music of the composers concerned" which has given the Historical Symphony its phoenix-like attribute of revival after each critical cremation.

But the first three movements of the symphony would probably have survived relatively unscathed had it not been for the finale. In his criticism, Schumann goes on to say: "The first three movements were good enough but the fourth was a complete failure. Such noises might be produced by Auber, Meyerbeer and the like, but Spohr should not lend his pen to writing such stuff."<sup>6</sup>

Another contemporary critic, writing in the *Musical World*, put the movement's failure down to the obtuseness of the audiences: "The audience, however, did not see the joke, and consequently treated that as earnest which the composer could only have meant as a severe, but not unfair, piece of ridicule."<sup>7</sup>

Joshua Berrett might also be numbered among those who fail to see the joke, at least in its fine detail. He does say that the movement amounts to "a heavy-handed satire of the au courant neo-romantic style", but his strictures on the finale show that he takes seriously certain procedures in it which, like Mozart's *Musical Joke*, invoke compositional shortcomings. Dr Berrett says that "the overall impression, however, is one of miscalculation in terms of general conception and deployment of materials" and he adds "Spohr's use of a double theme of sharply contrasting opposites leads to the effect of fragmentation. The alla breve first half, with its cantering triplets dispersed through a series of diminished seventh chords, sounds detached from its more diatonic and stable consequent in 2/4."

Also, the development "is not well enough crafted to hide the seams in the musical fabric. Within some forty measures of harmonic and melodic sequence there are six alternations between 2/2 and 2/4, the average length of a metrical unit being only four measures." But Spohr is here surely invoking just this "not well enough crafted" style of the composers he criticised for sacrificing everything in their "continual striving for effect."<sup>8</sup> The satire is therefore more subtle than Dr Berrett's suggested use of heavy-handed scoring and banal themes only, although these are present, of course. So Spohr aims at both listeners who are able to appreciate the more composerly points of his satire and those whose appreciation is confined to the "heavy-handed" part.

Spohr's misconception, then, is not the satire but its use in a work whose other movements were meant to be listened to in all seriousness. Audiences were thus wrong-footed by the finale which would have been better embedded in an overall 'jokey' or satirical piece just as Mozart's was. Instead, they were – and are – expected to switch listening modes at the start of the finale.

Although Spohr professed himself satisfied with the symphony, commenting that the ambiguous reaction of people to the finale was just the effect produced by the latest style of music, yet perhaps he later had second thoughts.<sup>9</sup> Among those who were unhappy with the finale was Mendelssohn. In a letter to Spohr about the symphony, he wrote that he would have liked "a greater instrumental piece in freer form, somewhat like the overture to *Faust* or so many of your magnificent, spirited overtures in its place."<sup>10</sup>

Spohr did not replace the finale with one of his "magnificent, spirited overtures" but in December 1842 he completed a

Concert Overture in D major, Op.126 which he subtitled "im ernsten Styl". It is our contention that in this work he was replying to his critics by composing the sort of music he thought should exemplify the "very latest period." The Historical Symphony was "in the style and taste of four different periods"; now, a model for the "serious style" of the fourth period was put forward.

Spohr wrote to his friend Wilhelm Speyer in January 1843 that he had attempted "a new form, or rather a new style." But Clive Brown notes that the overture stylistically has much in common with Spohr's symphonic masterpiece, the Fifth.<sup>11</sup> So we can see that, implicitly, Spohr's Fifth Symphony itself was being held up as the "serious style" which the music of the "very latest period" was to emulate if it was to avoid that "continual striving for effect" which Spohr geyed in the finale of the Sixth. Ironically, while the Overture "im ernsten Styl" has been completely neglected and the Fifth Symphony has fared only marginally better until quite recently, the Historical Symphony, as we have shown, contains ingredients (if only those associated with curiosity value) which have kept it alive.

Nevertheless, Spohr's message was surely not lost. The "serious style" was continued in such works as Schumann's Manfred Overture and Brahms's Tragic Overture as well as the symphonies of these two composers, showing that Spohr's battle was worth fighting, even if we have to admit that the Historical Symphony was a casualty of the campaign.

#### NOTES:

1. THE HISTORY OF THE PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY OF LONDON: 1813-1912 compiled by Myles Birket Foster (London 1912) pp. 160, 212, 235.
2. The 1984 recording on ORFEO C094841A; the new one on MARCO POLO 223439.
3. Translated in THE FORGOTTEN MASTER by Dorothy Moulton Mayer (London 1959) p. 151.
4. LOUIS SPOHR. A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY by Clive Brown (Cambridge 1984) p. 244.
5. LOUIS SPOHR. THREE SYMPHONIES edited by Joshua Berrett (New York 1980) p. xxv-xxvii.
6. Mayer p. 151.
7. Brown p. 244.
8. Berrett p. xxv.
9. Mayer p. 152 "As these very contradictions are the best description of the latest music, I can be well content with the effect produced by the last movement."
10. Brown p. 244.
11. Brown p. 270-1.