

A DUTCH VIEW OF SPOHR'S SYMPHONIES

By Jan C. Roosendaal

THE Dutch conductor Wouter Hutschenruyter (1859-1943) was trained as a violinist and was also a composer. He was for two years second conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam and then became principal conductor of the Utrecht Municipal Orchestra. Wouter came from a musical family; his grandfather, also called Wouter (1796-1878) was born in Rotterdam, studied among others with Hummel and founded an orchestra in Rotterdam. His son, Willem Jacob (1828-1889) was a horn player and conductor. Willem had two sons, Willem (1863-1950), who was also a horn player and later joined the Concertgebouw Orchestra, and Wouter. Apart from his conducting activities, Wouter Hutschenruyter was also very active as an author and published many books and essays, including one on Beethoven's symphonies, and the book that concerns us "De Ontwikkeling der Symphonie door Haydn, Mozart en Beethoven (wat de Voorgangers Nastreefden — wat de Navolgers Bereikten)" [The Development of the Symphony by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven (What their predecessors aimed at — what their successors achieved)]. It was published as No.9 in the series Musica-Bibliotheek by J.J. Lispet of Hilversum. The book is not dated and it goes as far as Mahler but, talking about Dutch composers, he mentions Bernard Zweers (1854-1924) so from that we can deduce that it was published about 1926.

Hutschenruyter devotes six pages to Spohr's symphonies and a translation of these appears below. First, however, it is necessary to say that in an earlier chapter he talks extensively about the programme symphony so that when he says that this kind of symphony went into oblivion after the Ovid symphonies of Dittersdorf, he does not overlook Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, he simply points out that since Dittersdorf there were no composers who wrote many programme symphonies.

Chapter VII deals with composers after Schubert. In this context the author remarks: "The most important man in this time is Louis Spohr (1784-1859), a symphonic composer of the utmost significance. We have to stay with him for a while. He wrote his First Symphony, in E flat, for a Music Festival in Frankenhausen in 1811, his Second for the Philharmonic Society in London (1820). Both compositions took their place in the musical world by storm; for that matter, between 1830 and 1860 each concert society saw it as its duty to perform one of Spohr's symphonies during each season. The Third and Fifth symphonies are both in C minor, the key of Beethoven's Fifth. Kretzschmar quotes in his book [Hermann Kretzschmar's 'Führer durch den Konzertsaal' (Guide through the concert hall) in which he analysed the orchestral works of hundreds of composers, many now forgotten] the Scherzo theme of Spohr's Fifth Symphony and finds Beethoven's spirit in it.

"Spohr's Fourth Symphony is called 'Die Weihe der Töne'. The orchestral score includes a poem by Carl Pfeiffer which Spohr uses as a guide (the composer asks for reproduction of this poem in the concert programme, preferring, however, that the poem be recited on the platform before the symphony is performed). This shows that Spohr had entered the area of the programme symphony, an art form we had not heard about since the days of Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf. The same can be said of Spohr's next symphonies (he wrote, like Beethoven, Schubert, Gade and Bruckner, nine works of this kind). However, before we talk about these works, we must draw our attention to a composer who is the most important in this field of programmatic symphonies: Hector Berlioz (1803-1869).

Chapter VIII: Spohr — Mendelssohn and Schumann.

This chapter starts with a short reminder of the *Symphonie Fantastique*, after which the author continues: "When we return to the programme symphonies of Louis Spohr, we meet works of quite a different nature — they are in no way the products of a wild and boundless fantasy. It does not alter the fact that Spohr's symphonies sound well, that they possess beautiful motives and themes, that they excel in a steady and logical structure and carefully avoid every possible banality. The above-mentioned Fourth Symphony was written after a poem by Carl Pfeiffer. Initially Spohr intended to use the poem for a cantata but after a while he concluded that the music he had written so far was not of any value. So he changed his plans and decided to use the poem as the basis for a symphony in which the intentions of the poet would serve as a guide.

“For making clear in what way Spohr acquitted himself of this duty, I repeat part of what I wrote about his work in my book ‘Programmatic Music.’

“The poem itself is an undoubtedly old-fashioned though well-intentioned and rather successful imitation of Schiller’s ‘Lied von der Glocke’ (Song of the Bell). In this poem, Schiller reflects on different situations in which bells play a part; Pfeiffer reflects on the connection between the power of sounds and human destiny. The verses are not bad at all and show one particularly praiseworthy quality; they change continually in metre and rhythm. The composer used this as a hint for classifying the movements and the tempi.

“When looking at the movements we discover a great variety, which is a big advantage, for the greater the contrast the larger the effect. The first movement is marked: *Largo* — *Starres Schweigen der Natur vor dem Erschaffen des Tons* — *Allegro: Reges Leben nach demselben. Naturlaute. Aufruhr der Elements.* Otto Klauwell states in his book ‘Programm Musik’ that he finds it most odd to see pictured in sound the silence in nature ‘before the creation of sound’ but there he is only seemingly on the right track. Spohr does not intend to paint silence but the gloomy impression of silence upon us.

“The *Allegro* follows the titles. The beautiful and friendly main subject speaks of ‘reges Leben’, while the sounds of nature and the revolt of nature are produced by well-known methods: in the woodwind the birds are singing, sharply rhythmic figures and chromatic scales take care of roaring thunderstorms. The second part (an enchanting piece of music and a suitable example of Spohr’s composition technique) is called *Wiegenlied — Tanz — Ständchen*. These three parts appear first in the given order; at the end of the movement they come together, a very difficult rhythmic combination but also a masterpiece of counterpoint.

“The third part is named *Kriegsmusik. Fortziehen in der Schlacht. Gefühle der Zurückbleibenden. Rückkehr der Sieger. Dankgebet*. Spohr, of course, here introduces a March, using the Trio to picture the feelings of those who have to stay behind, by way of giving this Trio a lamenting character. The thanksgiving prayer is partly built on the ‘Ambrosian Hymn’, the ‘Te Deum’. The final movement is called *Begräbnismusik. Trost in Tränen*. In this movement the composer uses the choral ‘Begrabt den Leib’, which is frequently sung in Germany during funeral ceremonies.

“This symphony as a whole gives in an impressive way evidence of Spohr’s significance for the development of orchestral music. I performed the symphony twice and had — after the composer’s wish — the poem recited before the performance. The members of the orchestra as well as the audience listened with great attention.

“It is not possible to treat here the other programme symphonies likewise. To review one of them should be sufficient to make clear in what sense Spohr saw his musical task and how he executed it. Of the last four symphonies only No.8 belongs to the territory of ‘absolute music’. No.6 (1839) has the subtitle ‘Historische Symphonie im Stile und Geschmack vier verschiedener Zeitalter’. The first movement deals with the period of Bach and Handel (about 1720), the second with the period of Haydn and Mozart (1780). Next comes Beethoven’s period (1810) and finally there is an impression of what then was called the modern trend. Kretzschmar draws our attention to the beginning of the third movement. It starts with a solo-motive for three timpani, an idea that appeared for the first time in Meyerbeer’s opera ‘Robert le Diable’ (1831) and was later used by Richard Strauss in his *Burleske for piano and orchestra* (1886). The finale is a kind of witches sabbath, full of ninths, sevenths and all sorts of dissonances, mixed with wailing ‘Vorhalte’. The Seventh is called ‘*Irdisches und Göttliches im Menschenleben*’. It is scored for two orchestras, a normal one and a small one, the latter consisting of solo string and woodwind instruments. One could consider this as a modified revival of the old *Concerto Grosso*. In the Ninth, Spohr paints ‘*Die Jahreszeiten*’ (1850). It is in two greater sections. In the first there are Winter and Spring (linked together), in the second we hear Summer and Autumn. The work is said to be of no great importance.”

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

Niels Gade wrote only eight symphonies while Schubert wrote only seven complete works plus several incomplete ones; although Bruckner left nine numbered symphonies, he also wrote two others. The author’s comments on Spohr’s Seventh Symphony being a modified revival of the old *Concerto Grosso* is wrong. Presumably he did not know this symphony and drew the wrong conclusion.