THE CONTEXT OF SPOHR'S SYMPHONY No.4, 'THE CONSECRATION OF SOUND'

By Peter Skrine

THE English title of Spohr's fourth symphony, *The Consecration of Sound*, suggests a pious solemnity which is instantly belied by the music itself. On the contrary, its first three movements radiate joie de vivre, evoking in turn an atmosphere of woodland happiness, romantic contentment and youthful nonchalance. A thunderstorm does blow up during the first movement, it is true, but it blows over — an episode which anticipates and reinforces the symphony's general mood of confidence and optimism. This is not surprising, as the background to its composition explains.[1] During the summer of 1832 Spohr, who had just turned 48, was advised by his physician to seek the beneficial effects of the waters at Nenndorf, a small spa midway between Hanover and Bückeburg, noted for its alkaline sulphur springs used for bathing and drinking. As Spohr tells us in his *Autobiography*, the objective of the visit was to cure a stiffness in one of his knees, contracted the preceding winter from a cold caught while skating (p. 177). He was not the first Romantic creative artist to enjoy Nenndorf and its surroundings. In 1806 Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué (1777-1843), the author of the celebrated tale of the watersprite Undine, had also taken the waters there; in the literary world Fouqué once occupied a position as important as Spohr's in the world of music, and it is no coincidence that his rediscovery and critical reassessment is currently gathering pace alongside the Spohr revival. No doubt the therapeutic atmosphere of Bad Nenndorf and the country walks around it revived the composer's lifelong delight in the sounds of the open air. As his knee recovered, he could say to himself 'solvitur ambulando': within a few months the symphony was completed, rehearsed and given its first performance. It proved to be his most popular large-scale orchestral work.

The personal circumstances of its composition go further than the mere inspiration of the genius loci, important though that was. Spohr's wife, Dorette, had come to Nenndorf with him, bringing with her a volume of verse by Karl Pfeiffer (1803-31), the brother of Marianne Pfeiffer, who in 1836 was to become Spohr's second wife. Pfeiffer, a gifted lawyer, amateur poet and member of Spohr's own music society, the Cäcilienverein, had become a close friend despite an age difference of some twenty years. In May 1826 he had accompanied the composer and his family to the Lower Rhine Music Festival at Düsseldorf at which the apocalyptic visions of *Die letzten Dinge* (The Last Judgment) were presented for the first time to an audience outside Kassel, and he had gone on to provide the libretti for two operas, *Pietro von Abano* (1827) and *Der Alchymist* (1830), which gave Spohr a renewed opportunity to pursue his own vein of Romantic fantasy, first given operatic expression in *Faust* (1813). It was a successful collaboration, rich in promise for the future, and one can well understand the master's desire to see it continue beyond the grave.

Pfeiffer's death came as a bitter blow. He was struck by apoplexy while bathing in the River Fulda on 31 July 1831. Now, as Spohr convalesced during the summer of 1832, a poem in the volume of posthumous verse Dorette had brought with her provided an opportunity for Spohr to create a musical monument to his friend, whose young life, so full of hope and vigour, achievement and promise, had been cruelly cut short.

Karl Pfeiffer's poem 'Die Weihe der Töne' belongs to a type of reflective lyric verse much in evidence during the Romantic period. In it the poet casts a thoughtful eye over the span of human life in order to trace its intrinsic pattern and ultimate, eternal purpose. In content and manner Wordsworth's ode 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' (1808) is closely related to Pfeiffer's less commanding effort.[2] But there is one salient difference. In the German's case, the unifying factor which governs all the stages of life from the cradle to the grave is sound — sound understood in the Keatsian sense of 'heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter', in the sense, that is, of harmony, and of man being in tune with life and nature. This means being responsive to their multiple rhythms, as when anxiety and introspection are forced to be silent when the jubilant dance resounds, an idea in the poem which Spohr translates directly into music towards the end of the second movement of his symphony, in the passage where lullaby, dance and serenade are heard simultaneously. Pfeiffer's idea reveals his awareness of the Romantic notion that the innocence of infancy survives into maturity; Spohr's musical treatment of it also suggests the classical idea associated with Schiller that graceful movement has something of the serenity of repose.

It is at this point that the title of the poem and symphony starts to cause problems. The accepted English rendering of the title as the 'consecration of sound' creates a fundamentally wrong impression in that it appears to imply that 'sound' is being 'consecrated', i.e. rendered sacred. In the first place 'Töne' is the plural form of the noun 'Ton' (sound) and therefore means 'sounds' in a sense which suggests a sequence of related and meaningful notes as opposed not so much to silence as to an arbitrary juxtaposition of noises: 'Tonkunst' (literally, the art of sound) is a German term for music or musical composition. Secondly, the text of Pfeiffer's poem makes it quite clear that the term 'consecration' is even more misleading. 'Weihe' is indeed translated in dictionaries as 'consecration', but in German it suggests a 'blessing' or 'benison' bestowed from on high; for this reason it therefore also means 'ordination' in the religious sense. Indeed the German word conveys that sense of blessedness — a contentment not without solemnity — which is felt by those on whom such blessing is conferred. The Fourth Symphony should therefore be understood as a depiction or, rather, an acknowledgement of the blessings conferred by the melodies, harmonies and rhythms that are as integral an element of nature and life as they are of music.

In this context it is significant that Spohr subtitles his work 'Charakteristisches Tongemälde in Form einer Symphonie', that is, a 'painting in sound' which possesses a 'quality all its own' and is presented in the 'form' of a symphony. It is therefore hardly surprising that here especially — even more, perhaps, than in many of his other works — his own very personal musical language or 'Tonsprache' is much in evidence. Indeed Spohr establishes his musical individuality from the outset with a depiction of birdsong and Waldesrauschen which has no obvious precedent in the music of the period, though it was to have many echoes, not least in the second scene of Act II of Wagner's *Siegfried* as the young hero, setting out into life, encounters the woodbird and the mysterious language of music.

In making the whole content of his poem depend on the notion that music provides both the melodies and the harmonies of life, Pfeiffer was building on an idea which had already been explored by Schiller, with whose writings he would, like all educated Germans of his generation, have been well acquainted. Schiller's most famous poem — at least in the nineteenth century — was 'Das Lied von der Glocke' (The Song of the Bell), a long poem of varying rhythm and pace in which the narrative of a bell being cast is offset by the ringing, pealing and tolling of bells at all the important stages of human life from a child's christening to a wedding, from fire alarm and public disaster to individual death and burial, and from revolutionary upheaval to the ultimate ideal of harmony in human society. Schiller's poem, completed in 1799, had been successfully set to music in 1808 by Andreas Romberg (1769-1821), who was to become Spohr's successor as Hofkonzertmeister in Gotha in 1815. Romberg, already the composer of an opera entitled *Die Macht der Musik* (The Power of Music, 1791), had chosen to set Schiller's text in the form of a cantata, which was to hold its place in the German amateur choral repertoire for the next hundred years. Spohr set out with a similar aim in view. He quite liked Romberg, but had uncharacteristically scathing words to say about his musical judgment: it may well be that when he realised he was embarking on what looked very like an imitation of Romberg's 'Lied von der Glocke', he decided instead to express the spirit of his friend's poem in purely instrumental terms. There were other, more practical reasons for his decision. He tells us that when he was about to begin work he found that the text of this style of poem did not lend itself altogether to the composition of a cantata, and that he felt much more disposed to 'represent' the subject matter of the poem in an instrumental composition. Of course this does not mean that Spohr, a distinguished opera composer and, by 1831, already making a name for himself in the domain of oratorio, was an opponent of vocal music or an exclusive advocate of 'pure music'; but he was a polyphonist by nature and was drawn instead to create a musical fabric which would weave together the strands of Pfeiffer's poem and present a frame of reference whose allusiveness is a good deal subtler. Yet he did not want to omit entirely the voice of the man whose 'In Memoriam' or 'Requiem' this was to be, so he stipulated that the poem should be 'printed and distributed in the music room, or recited aloud' before the symphony was performed. Thus the individual listener is asked to contribute an element of personal involvement by having to relate the ideas, images and rhythms of the poem to the symphony as it unfolds.

The artistic outcome was a work which can stand comparison with Berlioz's masterpiece of autobiographical fiction in music, the *Symphonie Fantastique*, written two years earlier, and which also both anticipates and goes well beyond Rachmaninov's symphonic 'enhancement' of Edgar Allan Poe's sub-Schillerian poem 'The Bells'.

In a letter written on 9 October 1832 to his old friend, the Frankfurt merchant banker and song-writer Wilhelm

Speyer (1790-1878), Spohr describes what he was doing as nothing less than the creation of 'eine neue Gattung der Instrumentalmusik' — a new genre of instrumental music which was subsequently to acquire the name 'programme music'. In this letter he also mentions the fact that, being someone who had always taken and still constantly took a great interest in the political regeneration of Germany, he had been too much annoyed by the recent retrograde steps to give himself calmly to a 'work of deep study'. Karl Pfeiffer, like most members of his more intimate circle in Kassel, had shared his deep concern with the political events unfolding in Germany, as well as his liberal, indeed radical leanings. The year 1830 and its aftermath had been a period of extreme political tension and uncertainty almost everywhere in Europe. It seemed to many as if the opposing trends in society were pulling its fabric apart. On the one hand the enlightened legacy of the late eighteenth century and the French Revolution, though temporally thwarted by reactionary forces after the fall of Napoleon, was heading towards emancipation and progress; on the other hand the privileged sections of society were stubbornly fighting a rearguard action to arrest any such development. These tensions were particularly evident in Germany, and not least in Electoral Hesse, a principality in the centre of the country, whose ruler had been created Elector as late as 1803, but who paradoxically was the only electoral prince to outlive the Holy Roman Empire which Napoleon had disbanded, but whose imperial ruler he was supposed to help choose. In 1831, Elector Wilhelm II of Hesse, Spohr's employer, reluctantly added his signature to a new constitution grudgingly granted to his subjects, but he promptly showed his disdain for this shift towards constitutional government by handing over the reins of executive power to Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm. The new co-regent, helped by his reactionary chief minister, Hans Daniel Ludwig Hassenpflug (1794-1862), set out to extinguish democracy in Hesse, restore autocracy and root out radicals and demagogues wherever they were to be found. For Spohr, these events sharpened the immediacy of the period's tensions, which he had read about avidly and which involved him deeply. Like many other citizens of Kassel, he had for a moment scented freedom and in so doing had felt himself to be a member of a larger and fairer Germany. But he had also had occasion to witness at first hand the flaunting of some of the grossest abuses of a reactionary regime in that public arena of contemporary society, the court theatre, when, for instance, Countess Reichenbach and Countess Schaumburg, the ladies in the private lives of the electoral prince and his co-regent, displayed themselves and their tantrums in public. World famous and well able to look after himself, Spohr had enjoyed a relatively untroubled life as Hofkapellmeister in Kassel since his arrival in 1821; but now, as the court theatre was dragged into a situation of growing political turbulence and financial constraint, he, too, began to feel increasingly frustrated and restricted.[3]

The pattern and fabric of the Fourth Symphony reflect this layer of its personal sub-text, blending it subtly with the more generalised statements in Pfeiffer's poem. In the first movement the innocent arcadian pleasure of woodland and birdsong is disturbed only by the ominous rumbling of distant thunder — a motif which also recurs with political undertones in the literature of the 1815-1848 period in Germany and Austria. In the second movement the intimate joys of love and life come uppermost in what may aptly be described as a tone-painting expressing the favourite preoccupations of the Biedermeier period in musical terms: a musical counterpart, as it were, of Ludwig Tieck's story 'Des Lebens Überfluß' (1839) or the paintings of Moritz von Schwind (1804-71). But this comfortable domestic idyll of private life, sheltered from the challenges of the world outside and mirroring Spohr's own, is drowned in the third movement by brash march rhythms which are the musical correlative of Pfeiffer's lines about youth's 'rashness to dare to hold life cheap' at the prospect of action 'when the trumpets ring out', and which are offset by music which conveys the anxious emotional intensity of those left at home. The victory won, the victors return in triumph. Bloodlust gives way to the 'gentle harmonies of peace', while the uplifting strains of an 'Ambrosianischer Lobgesang' — that is, the Te Deum — ring out.[4] It seems, as the third movement draws to its close, that the struggle for political rights and social emancipation has been won.

No political period coded its messages more effectively in music than the one which began in August 1830 with the rousing of the populace to action by a performance of Auber's *Masaniello* in Brussels. It is in this context that the adoption by Spohr of the march as an integral component of symphonic and religious works should properly be seen. The march is the musical form best suited to convey the cluster of interrelated notions verbally conveyed by terms such as 'challenge', 'enthusiasm', 'valour' and 'idealism'; Beethoven had used it to create a heroic dimension and introduce stirring forward momentum into the music of an age not yet disenchanted with such notions. But Beethoven was dead, and Spohr must have been well aware that the musical world now expected great things of him as Beethoven's successor. But this was no longer Beethoven's age. And then, on 22 March 1832, shortly before he began work on the symphony, came the news that Germany had lost

its greatest poet and writer, Goethe, the singer of life and nature, who had fired successive generations with his idealism tempered by wisdom. To cultured Germans, 1832 seemed the end of an era, and called for a threnody.

The colouring of the Symphony now takes on a more sombre tone as the solemn melody of a chorale rings out in response to Pfeiffer's words about a lonely grave. As Spohr's F minor Larghetto unfolds, no German of Lutheran persuasion could in 1832 have failed to hear within him the words of 'Begrabt den Leib in seine Gruft', Klopstock's sentimentalised eighteenth-century paraphrase of the starker, sterner burial hymn 'Nun lasst uns den Leib begraben', which had made its first appearance in 1531 in the Bohemian Brethren's first hymn-book, 'Ein New Geseng buchlen' or 'new little song book' by Michael Weisse (c. 1488-1534), which soon became a stimulus and model for Protestant hymn books throughout the German-speaking lands and far beyond. Luther himself had thought highly of Weisse's burial hymn, commenting 'I like it very much; it's the work of a good poet', and in Catherine Winkworth's magisterial collection of German hymns in English translation entitled 'Lyra Germanica' (second series, 1858), it leads the section for the burial of the dead. Her English version reads:

Now lay we calmly in the grave
This form, whereof no doubt we have
That it shall rise again that Day.
In glorious triumph o'er decay.

Such is the sub-text of the Symphony's last movement, to which Tchaikovsky was to make despairingly ironic reference in the last movement of his *Pathétique.*[5]

Spohr's use of a hymn tune or chorale as the basis for a symphonic movement was another of the Fourth Symphony's innovatory features. Mendelssohn, it is true, had anticipated him by putting Luther's 'Ein' feste Burg' to effective use in the last movement of his posthumously published *Reformation* Symphony of 1830: but there the chorale is quoted to mark a specific historical occasion. In the case of *The Consecration of Sound*, the function of the hymn tune is less overt, its implications subtler and more complex. Pfeiffer's death personified for Spohr the demise of his hopes and those of many of his contemporaries for a freer, juster and more democratic Germany; indeed the personal association between the tune, its words, Pfeiffer's death and their shared ideals and aspirations may have been closer still, since 'Begrabt den Leib' or 'Nun lasst uns den Leib begraben' may well have been sung at Pfeiffer's funeral along with the 'solemn dirge for several voices' which Spohr composed for the occasion.[6] Moreover it is also worth remembering that, thanks to Catherine Winkworth and Sterndale Bennett, the co-editor of 'The Chorale Book for England' (1863) which provided the tunes for her 'Lyra Germanica',[7] the Victorian concert-goers who so admired Spohr's Fourth Symphony were more attuned to the valedictory meaning of its last movement than listeners today. In mood as well as in structure Elgar's Second Symphony is not so far away as one might think.

The writing of the Fourth Symphony was for Spohr not just a way of passing the time as his knee healed; it was, too, a recovery from bereavement: first Pfeiffer, then his own younger brother and close assistant Ferdinand (1792-1831), whose widow and two children he now had to support. Yet it is characteristic of the man that his symphony does not end on a funereal and despondent note. Pfeiffer begins the last section of his poem by asking whether perhaps the serene sounds he hears at the lonely funeral are dreams sent from that other unknown fatherland beyond the grave. Can sounds, he asks, be intimations of another, more beautiful world? If the answer to this question is in the affirmative — and presumably for Spohr, who had loved music with unwavering purpose and passion all his life, no other answer would have been conceivable — then the conciliatory finale of his symphony should come as no surprise and certainly not as a disappointment. The personal grief of lost friends and lost illusions is transcended with an affirmation worthy of Goethe: indeed, the Fourth Symphony, *The Consecration of Sound*, deserves recognition as a bold and imaginative fulfilment of the question which Spohr's contemporary, the author composer E.T.A. Hoffmann, had posed when he wrote: 'Is not music the mysterious language of a spirit kingdom far away?'

An understanding of the multiple impulses which went into the making of the Fourth Symphony's last movement helps to explain why Spohr instinctively disliked the Finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, whose Scherzo he so much admired for its originality and 'genuinely romantic texture'. He felt that it effect was dissipated by the resumption of 'empty noise' — a conclusion which is literally the antithesis of the

Weltanschauung he held throughout his life and which he expressed most genuinely and profoundly in the *Consecration of Sound*.[8] Spohr the violinist had an exceptionally fine ear for 'Töne'; Spohr the composer and thinking German was grateful for the blessings of music which he sensed and enjoyed wherever he was and whatever he was doing — not least when he was with his beloved wife Dorette, a distinguished harpist whose limpid notes were a foretaste of the celestial bliss that was soon to be hers: she died on 20 November 1834. If we have come to prefer and rate more highly Beethoven's solution to the problem of how to end a symphony, this may in large part be because we respond more readily to his unremitting struggle with sound, rhythm, harmony and hearing, and regard it as a nobler, more titanic demonstration of creativity grappling with the challenges of human existence than we now do to Spohr's gentler, more conciliatory, but no less original attempt to encompass and reconcile in music the disparate phenomena of life and death, nature and art: the themes that underlie the finest poetry of his contemporary Goethe.

For its first German audiences in 1832, the year of Goethe's death, the cultural allusiveness and political sub-text of Spohr's Fourth Symphony enhanced its expressive power and endowed it with metaphysical depth. No doubt its underlying political message as well as its orchestral novelty were not lost on Dvořák, whose ability to use strings, woodwind, brass and percussion to evoke the magic of landscape and the aspirations of nationhood owes much to its example. To many a Victorian British concert-goer in the days before Hubert Parry signalled the downgrading of Spohr's achievement in his essay on 'Symphony' in Grove's Dictionary, the *Consecration of Sound* must have been all the more acceptable because its earnest and pious-sounding Germanic title betokened a profundity which turned out to be quite easy on the ear and was not far removed from the loving portrayal of the countryside and the intimations of immortality associated with the finest works of Wordsworth himself.

1. The present article owes much to, and should be read as an extension of, the sensitive analysis of this symphony by Keith Warsop, 'Spohr's Fourth Symphony, a Requiem for Germany?', *Spohr Journal*, 17 (1990), 2-6.
2. Lamartine was a master of the genre. A notable example is 'Les Préludes', one of the *Nouvelles méditations poétiques* (1823), a 'sonata' in verse in which the poet surveys four aspects of life in a musically structured form. It was to inspire the title of Liszt's symphonic poem *Les Préludes* (1856), which, according to the composer's preface, treats life as a series of preludes to the unknown after-life.
3. The fullest account of Spohr's political stance is to be found in Herfried Homburg, 'Politische Aeusserungen Louis Spohrs. Ein Beitrag zur Opposition Kasseler Künstler während der kurhessischen Verfassungskämpfe', *Zeitschrift des Vereins für hessische Geschichte und Landeskunde*, 75/76 (1964/65), 546-68.
4. Spohr's evocation of the Te Deum or 'Ambrosianischer Lobgesang' (the German term means 'Ambrosian hymn of praise') is based on a melody in the Kassel hymn-book of 1828, in which it is explicitly described as 'new'. See Folker Göthel, *Thematisch-bibiographisches Verzeichnis der Werke von Louis Spohr* (Tutzing: Schneider, 1981).
5. See Hartmut Becker, 'Spohr und die russische Musik', in *Louis Spohr: Festschrift und Ausstellungskatalog* (Kassel, 1984), pp. 125-27.
6. *Louis Spohr's Autobiography* (London, 1878), vol. II, p. 173.
7. Robin A. Leaver, *Catherine Winkworth. The Influence of her Translations on English Hymnody* (St Louis, 1978), p. 37.
8. Christopher Tutt has discussed this aspect of the relationship between the two composers in 'Spohr and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony' in *Spohr Journal*, 7 (1980), 13-15.