

MY FAVOURITE SPOHR WORK

by Chris Tutt and others

TO MARK the 25th anniversary of the formation of the Spohr Society of Great Britain, members were asked to nominate their choice on the above subject. We print a few which went further than just naming the favourite piece.

Chris Tutt writes:

With so many works from which to choose it is difficult to narrow it down to one piece. Thanks to recent recordings there are many more works available to listen to than there were even five years ago. I still have a soft spot for the first two works that I got to know many years ago, the Nonet and the Eighth Violin Concerto. None of Spohr's works seem to me to be absolutely unblemished masterpieces but several of them are very close to that. Others do have rather dull patches in places, though none that I have heard so far have been complete 'duds'. I have listened with particular pleasure to the opera *Faust*, the overture to *Pietro von Abano*, the First and Third symphonies, the 11th Violin Concerto, the String Quintet in B minor, the string quartets Op.45/2 and Op.84/3, the song *Sonntag und Montag* and several others but for me the palm goes to the String Quartet in C major, Op.29/2.

This quartet comes from the Vienna years when Spohr reached full maturity as a composer and wrote several of his most successful works including *Faust* and the Nonet. Fine though the Nonet is, I think that this quartet is an even finer work. I feel that it has a wonderfully fresh flow of inspiration and each of its movements has its distinct character while fitting smoothly into the whole. It combines the conversational features of real chamber music with opportunities for virtuoso display, not only for the leader, but also for the others at times.

The first movement is a superb example of the freshness of flow. Many of Spohr's first movements have an ingenious thematic structure and this is no exception. The opening melody has several different patterns of notes which keep recurring in varying combinations. The second subject too has a similar lyrical flow but although it uses some of the same thematic elements it has a distinctive, romantic character and there is no danger of monotony. There is a masterly transition to some semiquaver passagework for the first violin but this is later shared with the viola and the cello. There is no cadential trill either here or in the finale, a mannerism which sometimes can blemish such movements in other chamber works. Elements from the passagework appear again in the development and in the coda as an integral part of the structure. The counterpoint employed at times arises quite naturally in the flow of the music. There is nothing like the rather ponderous fugato which comes in the first movement of the Nonet, written just over a year before.

The *Adagio* second movement is a wonderfully romantic elegy which shows to the full Spohr's mastery of harmonic and instrumental colour. At times it is almost like an operatic duet for the first violin and the cello. Later the viola joins in with its richly expressive tones. Next we have a very good example of the 'dark minuet' with its sinister undertones. It is a comparatively short piece with an attractive lighter *Trio* section. Even though it does not benefit from the tone colour of clarinet and horns it compares well with the minuet in the Octet with similar romantic atmosphere.

The finale is a masterpiece of virtuoso string writing which sets off at a furious pace. It makes considerable demands on all the instruments, not just the first violin, and is full of vigorous self-confidence. It is a splendid end to the work, even if it does not have quite the sense of fun of the corresponding movement in the Nonet. If any one of Spohr's quartets should be back in the regular repertoire, this is it. There is a tremendous amount for both the performers and the audience to enjoy. It would certainly not be out of place in a concert which included some of the great classics of the quartet repertoire. Which of our present quartet groups will respond to the challenge?

Robert Jordan writes:

Certainly *one* of my favourite Spohr works is the Clarinet Concerto No.1. It is the first work by Spohr I ever got to know and that led to my writing to Maurice Powell in the late 1960s and joining the Spohr Society of Great Britain to which I have belonged ever since. I was in music school at UBC at the time and was learning Weber's Clarinet Concerto No.2. I obtained the only available recording of it (L'Oiseau-Lyre SOL60035) which had the Spohr on the other side so, of course I listened to it as well. I found the work extremely interesting, discovered the Spohr Nonet in the discount bin of a now-defunct Vancouver record shop and, from hearing these two works, became fascinated with Spohr and his place in the musical history of Europe. Another favourite Spohr work of mine is the Symphony No.3 as performed on the RBM3035 recording with the Südwestdeutsche Philharmonie conducted by Tamás Sulyok. Not a bad recording of some pretty decent music; before I obtained this LP I was beginning to wonder if I would ever hear a Spohr symphony! Congratulations to the Society for the 25 years of its existence. I hope the next 25 are as fruitful and that I shall be around for all of them!

Keith Warsop writes:

My favourite is the Piano Trio No.1 in E minor. This wonderful work seems to sum up Spohr's artistic personality at a stroke — the very opening, the march-like second subject, the verve of the bravura passages; the *Larghetto* sings straight to the heart — the *Scherzo* full of rhythmic variety, the tuneful *Trio*; and the finale, one of Spohr's best, is another movement offering maximum variety. And what makes this better than a number of other outstanding works by Spohr is — nostalgia! First heard late on a Friday night in October, 1959, in a superb broadcast performance by the Kantrovich Trio it remained for many years one of the few recommendable Spohr interpretations and the more treasurable for being the only one from his late period. Nothing else has dislodged it; when the rain is beating on the window panes, the fire is blazing away, the door is secure against the elements and the cat is purring on the hearthrug, then the E minor Trio comes into its own as the perfect listening.

Maurice Powell writes:

I first came across Spohr's music in my mid-teens at the height of an enthusiasm for Mozart. Like many of us, I suspect, the first work I discovered was the Nonet in the much-loved old recording on the Saga label. This discovery was followed by countless hauntings of my local record library, and countless borrowings of Gervase de Peyer's recording of the First Clarinet Concerto. The Octet came next — a work I rate as high as any other by Spohr — and via access to several poor quality recordings from the radio I became familiar with the Double-Quartets, the B minor String Quintet, excerpts from *Jessonda* and some of the violin concertos. However, the work I admire most, the one I would take to a desert island, the one that contains much of what I admire most in Spohr, is the Concertante for two violins and orchestra, Op.48, a work that bristles with a bright and breezy self-confidence. It was written during Spohr's years at Gotha, for me his most interesting period. It was a time of great optimism despite the ravages of the Napoleonic wars, a time of marriage, of concert tours, of his emergence as an important musical director and teacher, and the period when Spohr began to win recognition as a significant composer in all the major genres of music. A sunny, fulfilling time, close to Haydn and Mozart, with the frustrations and disappointments of Kassel still beyond the horizon.

Peter Turner writes:

Many years ago as a Spohr "ignoramus" I heard a recording of the Clarinet Concerto No.1 in C minor with Gervase de Peyer and the London Symphony Orchestra under Colin Davis. This work I enjoyed so much I've been a Spohr "seeker" ever since.