

NOTES ON SPOHR'S SYMPHONIES

by Simon M. Ballard

CONSIDERING that a new cycle of Beethoven symphonies appears in our recording catalogues so regularly, it has been surprising that, up to now, several fine composers have been almost totally neglected, in spite of the fact that they wrote excellent works for this medium. Spohr must be counted in the front rank of such composers — and it is only since the introduction of CDs that we have been given a long overdue chance to become better acquainted with much of his outstanding music — with much more to come, apparently! His symphonies deserve to stand beside those of Mendelssohn and Schumann as superb examples of early romantic works following in the footsteps of Beethoven and Spohr's idol, Mozart. We know that Spohr studied Mozart scores very closely — which is where he is likely to have learned his excellent and sensitive orchestral skills; for he ranks with the very highest orchestrators. Now that all nine published symphonies are recorded, we have, at last, an opportunity to study them more closely (the Tenth is not yet recorded — a very moot point this; Spohr expressly wished it not to be published. Would Bruckner have consented to his early “study” symphony or the D minor, No. ‘0’ being printed?).

Let us briefly examine the symphonies and try to discover where their roots might be and what they themselves were to influence. Spohr was an innovator — until his own appeared, there had been very few other composers whose symphonies had been written with any kind of programme in mind — the *Pastoral* of Beethoven being the best known example. A symphony for Double Orchestra was an unusual idea just as the “miniature violin concerto” (as in the third movement of Symphony No.8) was hardly a common occurrence either! (This being said, it must be remembered that Haydn had occasionally used a solo instrument at such a point in similar movements — for example, Symphony No.95).

Symphony No.1 in E flat

Coincidence, probably; but nevertheless, there is a bow to Mozart in the opening four notes of this symphony — for they are the precise four which open the finale of Mozart's *Jupiter*. The main *Allegro* of the first movement, however, is more akin in both key and tempo to Mozart's E flat work, K.543. Already, in the course of this earliest Spohr symphony we notice the side-slipping modulations that we have come to know and love with our composer. The slow movement is obviously influenced by Haydn — it is faintly like that master's *Clock* symphony slow movement in feeling; and the repetitions of the main theme are beautifully and interestingly varied. The minuet and finale also have a Haydnesque feel to them.

Symphony No.2 in D minor

This work, as it should be, is more polished and deeply felt than No.1. There is here the wistful pathos that we associate most with the composer, coupled with the invariably expert orchestration. Long popular in England during Spohr's lifetime, the D minor symphony achieves a natural build and progression, from the rhythmically fascinating first movement (e.g. the second subject accompaniment) through the lovely slow movement and lively scherzo to the cheerful finale, where Haydn once more puts in an appearance.

Symphony No.3 in C minor

The fact that Spohr criticised Beethoven's fifth symphony — in the same key as his own third and fifth — did not prevent him from being influenced by it. A similar four-note figure appears at the end of the slow introduction to the first movement and elsewhere; but the melodies are pure Spohr. Of all musicians, Spohr is perhaps the easiest to recognise by just listening — which is both his strength or his weakness, depending on how you view these things! Once again, in this third symphony, we have a jolly, Haydn-like finale, preceded by a fine scherzo with the usual fascinating Trio, from the point of view of modulation. Pleasant though the slow movement is, it is perhaps one of his weaker movements — maybe it is the themes that are just a touch dull.

Symphony No.4 in F *The Consecration of Sound*

This is the first symphony with a programmatic idea; the actual programme was covered in great detail in the 1993 Spohr Journal. The dark introduction, followed by a gently swaying first movement contains passages of startling originality — the wonderful bird calls, for example. Granted, Beethoven's *Pastoral* slow movement features three birds too; but these seem very well behaved when compared with Spohr's odd and discordant ones! The movements of this work are more closely connected than in the preceding symphonies and one is not particularly aware of each separate movement overall. The slower sections are very characteristic of the composer — the March very Weberian. The last section of the symphony opens with a theme very similar to that of the first movement *Allegro*; this sort of ‘cross-reference’ being a hint of things to come in the following work.

Symphony No.5 in C minor

By common consent, this symphony ranks as one of the great masterpieces of Spohr. It is a truly 'cyclic' work — along with Schumann's fourth, one of the first of its kind — and, in its remarkable theme transformations, it foretells exactly the kind of composition that Saint-Saëns was to construct in his 'Organ' Symphony. Not for the first time, too, do we note the influence that Spohr must have had on Sullivan, (remember that Spohr is mentioned in the Mikado's song) for example, in the melody of the symphony's introduction played on the oboe, in a different tempo, at the beginning of the middle section of the first movement; indeed, it might have come straight out of *Iolanthe*! It is this very melody that after being then briefly swept away grows into the longer utterly sublime music of the remainder of the section — how one wishes it could go on for ever! The lovely slow movement thinly disguises its debt to the slow movement of Beethoven's Fifth — compare the opening melody with bars 224-225 of the Beethoven *Andante*, for example — and both movements bask in the same radiant A flat major warmth. A brilliant scherzo follows, the Trio looking forward to Dvořák and then the tense finale with its marvellous references to the opening theme of the symphony again (the work's 'motto'). The fifth is a truly remarkable masterpiece, whose appearance in our concert programmes ought to be assured.

Symphony No.6 in G Historical

This symphony sets out to suggest the four periods of music with which Spohr was familiar (including the so-called 'New' period of his own day). It is obvious that an idea such as this would lead to a certain amount of gentle pastiche; but our composer manages to place his personal stamp on each movement without sacrificing the basic idea of it. The almost verbatim quotations from two Mozart symphonies (in movement two) were obviously deliberate and the Scherzo might easily have come from Beethoven himself. The final movement shows Spohr experimenting again; so, although the symphony is not one of the most original of the series it stands as a very interesting and certainly 'historical' document.

Symphony No.7 in C *The Earthly and Divine in Human Life*

This fascinating Double-Symphony is, without doubt, the other outstanding masterpiece of the set. Once again, there is irregularity in the movements, slow movement and scherzo being combined together. Each movement is titled after an aspect of human life; 1. Childhood; 2. Passion; 3. Triumph of the Divine. Nothing could be more appropriate than the childlike melody which opens the main body of the first movement, after the fascinatingly orchestrated introduction. The second theme of this movement is one of Spohr's loveliest inspirations; the delightful woodwind triplets reminding us of the second subject of the finale of the first piano trio. Spohr again demonstrates his love of woodwind instruments in the slow section of the second movement — the beautiful bassoon melody is unforgettable and, when the tempo quickens, the music becomes unsettled, even dramatic (not usually a word applied to Spohr) with the woodwind still to the fore. Unease reigns in the final movement, until the final triumph in a peaceful C major coda. Although the introduction to the first movement and the coda to the finale are based on the same notes, the seventh is not a concentrated cyclic symphony like the fifth — rather a musical journey through human feelings. Surely this is a novel and unusual work that would be welcome in our concert halls again — as it once was!

Symphony No.8 in G

The eighth symphony is a return to 'normality' in that there are four distinct movements. The first and last are alike — rather gentle and somewhat pastoral, making us think ahead again, this time to Dvořák's Symphony No.8 (also in G!). The two central movements enshrine the very soul of the work; the slow one being among the most lovely that Spohr has left us — wistful shining beauty, combined with deft and remote modulation. The fascinating scherzo reminds us of Mendelssohn and the Trio is the 'miniature violin concerto' referred to earlier, once again suggestive of Sullivan in certain places.

Symphony No.9 in B minor *The Seasons*

The ninth symphony gives the usual titles to the four movements, beginning with Winter — but it is a far cry from Vivaldi's treatment of the same subject. Spohr's winter is bleak and rather remote with halting rhythms, surprise harmonies and rather barren textures at times. It is one of those movements which is very memorable without the listener being able to say why. The gentle minuet — 'Spring' — looks back to Symphony No.4 in its birdcalls while the third movement, 'Summer', reminds us of the slow movement of the fifth. The triumphant 'Autumn' rounds off the work in a contented B major.

In this short survey, I have not gone into deep or detailed analysis. I rather hope that I may send some readers to the CD stores with their appetites whetted; for the symphonies, I hope, that are less familiar to them — and who knows? Maybe the day will dawn when all of Spohr's major works are available on disc (it certainly seems a possibility in the light of the last couple of years). Perhaps then, Spohr will be recognised as (to quote an ancient edition of *Grove*) 'a great master, second in rank only to the very giants of art.' Let us hope so.