

ABSTRACT: Spohr's Early Chamber Music (1796-1812)

A Contribution to the History of Nineteenth-Century Genres

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This abstract of his doctoral dissertation is provided by Martin Wulfhorst who has just defended and deposited it at the City University of New York. The final version has 700 pages, numerous musical examples, facsimiles, tables, catalogues and a discography. There is a possibility that an American publisher will bring it out (perhaps in abbreviated form) or, like all American dissertations, it will be made available on microfilm by UMI Microfilms.

USES concepts of structural historiography in order to determine how Spohr's aesthetics (Chapter II), performing career, teaching, and relations to publishers (Chapter III) affected his response to the conventions of the classical, *gearbeitet* quartet and of four virtuosic genres: the violin duet, the short display piece for one or two solo instruments, alone or with three to five players or orchestra (rondo, fantasy, paraphrase-potpourri, variation set, variation-potpourri), the *concertant* sonata for harp and violin, and the *quatuor brillant* (Chapters IV-VII).

Spohr came into contact with the philosophy of the Enlightenment through members of his family and through Masons and Philanthropinists in Gotha. His enlightened aesthetics shaped his seemingly contradictory compositional development and generated a stylistic conception which ultimately caused his once famous works to fall into oblivion because it proved incompatible with the romantic dichotomy of functional versus substantial, autonomous music and with the narrower performance types which crystallised during the romantic era (Chapters IX-XI). The enlightened maxim that the artist must serve society brought Spohr to gear his early instrumental composition to the two principal contemporary types of music-making: the mixed-programme public concert and the music party (private performance and reading session), characterised by a combination of education and entertainment. Spohr composed his first-period chamber works primarily for the performances he gave alone and together with his wife, the harp virtuoso Dorette Scheidler — in his home towns Brunswick and Gotha as well as on his early tours which led him, being one of the foremost violinists of the age, throughout Germany; to a lesser degree they were also intended for his students and for publication. His orientation towards the music culture of his time led him to accept some of the conventions of virtuosic genres (extended passagework sections for display purposes, additive, episodic, or rhapsodic virtuosic forms, and use of popular, borrowed tunes).

After a juvenile phase, during which the influence of the conventional *galant* idiom of the preclassical and classical periods dominated in Spohr's chamber music, he embraced the enlightened principle that the musician's mission is "ennobling the spirit" and that all art must be "ennobling" and ennobled: he strove not only to perfect his music by means of extensive revisions but also to raise his works in 'low', virtuosic genres to the level of substantial chamber music by means of stylistic elements representing two different tendencies.

First, Spohr adopted forward-looking proto-romantic elements from French opera (Cherubini) and violin concerto (Rode). They are part of a "continuous thread of early romantic thought" (Brook 1970), which led from *Sturm und Drang* through the revolutionary opera to 19th-century romanticism: bold chromatic harmony (Spohr's most progressive stylistic trait, as linear analysis reveals), individually shaped designs alien to the music of Viennese classicism (binary, complementary, and epic sonata form, two-movement sonata-cycle, and short and free forms), *schwärmerisch*, melancholic, and grand expression, and exploration of timbre as an essential compositional parameter (by means of a rich palette of dynamics and colours as well as demanding instrumental devices). Related to these compositional means are Spohr's expressive style of violin playing and his novel aesthetics of performance, built on the subordination of the virtuoso's individuality to the "spirit of the composition" — especially in the classical quartet repertoire that Spohr helped forge.

Second, his quest for "ennobling" qualities also resulted in a "classicising" tendency (Rosen 1970): he gradually transferred compositional elements and procedures from the instrumental music of the Viennese classical composers, in particular Mozart, to his virtuosic chamber genres. The "classicising" tendency was first inspiring: it brought him to apply to his early duets, short pieces, and sonatas a sophisticated motivic design and a smooth, coherent, dynamic concept of form. During the second half of Spohr's first period, however, the "classicising" tendency began to acquire a restrictive effect. It gradually curbed the proto-romantic elements in his music and playing, prevented them from growing into mature romanticism, generated occasional self-plagiarism of "ennobled" details, and ultimately led in some of his later works to monotony, mannered quality, academicism, and extreme eclecticism (*Biedermeier* style).

The best among Spohr's early chamber works, which show a successful fusion of virtuosity and compositional substance, belong not only among his most original compositions but also to the most valuable chamber-music repertoire of the early 19th century.