

SPOHR'S OVERTURES

by Keith Warsop

SPOHR'S admission to the 19th century pantheon of great composers can be put down to what was perceived as his excellence in most branches of composition: his operas *Faust*, *Zemire und Azor* and *Jessonda*; his oratorios; the best of his symphonies and concertos; his chamber music; and, to a lesser extent, his songs. But a glance at regular orchestral concert programmes of the period shows that Spohr's overtures proved to be among the most frequently played of his compositions and some of them, especially *Faust*, *Jessonda*, *Der Berggeist* and *Der Alchymist*, achieved the rather dubious status of "potboilers", being available in all sorts of arrangements for pier bands, brass bands, salon orchestras and the like. The catalogue of Spohr's works compiled by H.M. Schletterer¹ lists 20 pieces under Section B (Instrumental) Group VIII (Overtures) as follows (WoO numbers added where applicable):

- Overture to the Operetta *Die Prüfung* (D), Op.15a
- Overture (C minor), Op.12
- Overture to the Opera *Abrina* (Eb), Op.21
- Overture to the Opera *Der Zweikampf mit der Geliebten* (E minor) [WoO.50]
- Overture to the Opera *Faust* (C minor), Op.60
- Overture to the Cantata *Das befreite Deutschland* (C minor) [WoO.64]
- Overture to the Opera *Zemire und Azor* (Ab) [WoO.52]
- Große Concertouvertur* (F) [WoO.1]
- Overture to the Opera *Jessonda* (Eb), Op.63
- Overture to the Opera *Der Berggeist* (D), Op.73
- Overture to the Tragedy *Macbeth* (B minor), Op.75
- Overture to the Oratorio *Die letzten Dinge* (D minor) [WoO.61]
- Sinfonia to Part II of this work (C minor)
- Overture to the Opera *Pietro von Abano* (F minor), Op.76
- Overture to the Opera *Der Alchymist* (C minor) [WoO.57]
- Overture to the Oratorio *Des Heilands letzte Stunden* (C minor) [WoO.62]
- Fantasia on Raupach's Mythological Tragedy *Die Tochter der Luft*, in the form of a concert overture (C minor), Op.99
- Overture to the drama *Der Matrose* (A) [WoO.7]
- Overture to the Oratorio *Der Fall Babylons* (Eb) [WoO.63]
- Concertouvertur im ernsten Styl* (D), Op.126

The very first overture Spohr wrote, that in **C minor, Op.12** in July 1806, was in fact his first independent orchestral composition. His previous experience of writing for orchestra was limited to concertos (in which he figured as violin soloist) and a concert aria for his future mother-in-law. This first overture seems to have made an immediate impression because of its Romantic ambience. More than half a century later it was the subject of a rapturous letter when Moritz Hauptmann, cantor of St. Thomas's, Leipzig, and Spohr's former pupil and assistant, wrote to the aged master wishing him 75th birthday greetings on April 4 1859. Hauptmann recalled: "It has been my privilege to spend many happy days in your neighbourhood — a year in Gotha, six months in Vienna, twenty years in Cassel — but I daresay you yourself scarcely remember the music which made me love you even before that time — to wit, your first volume of songs, and an orchestral Overture in C minor. Franz and I got this last performed at a *Café*. I remember it as if it had happened yesterday. It was beautiful summer weather — I was only seventeen — no criticism stood in my way — and the inevitable desire to know how things are done, which must come later on, troubled me not. The music went straight to my heart, so that for days I walked about in a dream, thinking of nothing else. As for my architectural studies, they went to the dogs altogether; in fact it was this Overture that made me a musician instead of a builder."² Any suggestion of hyperbole through kindness, occasioned by the fact that Hauptmann was writing to Spohr at a time when the composer's physical powers were visibly failing can be dismissed immediately for Hauptmann expresses the same feelings in writing to his friend Franz Hauser on July 20 1827 (and he certainly did not hesitate to criticise Spohr in his correspondence with Hauser): "Once, long ago, I bought an Overture of [Spohr's] in C minor, and Franz, who had just come back as a pupil, happened to see it at my house. Energetic as ever, he contrived that the people at the Baths should hear it at once. That was in 1809, eighteen years ago therefore, and I was at an age when one of La Fontaine's novels could make me infinitely happy or miserable. After hearing that Overture I cried, cried again the whole way home, cried at home by the pailful, and cried for several days afterwards. I see myself even now, sitting alone

in my room, steeped in that music, kneeling on the ground with my head on a chair, weeping like mad, in a delirium of joy and despair. Nothing in later life can compare with this."³

So the overture certainly had a strong effect on some of its first listeners. It shows Spohr immediately introducing an effect which became almost stock-in-trade with him: the return of the slow introduction into the body of the movement. Of course, it was not an innovation; it was, famously, Haydn in the *Drumroll* Symphony who is given credit for that, though earlier inventive composers such as Boccherini and Brunetti utilised slow introductions in similar ways without achieving fame as pioneers. However, in Spohr's case, he developed the uses to which he put the device; sometimes the returning introduction replaces the development, as in the Third Symphony, in others it heralds the recapitulation and, most notably in the Fifth Symphony, it is interlocked with the development of material from the main *Allegro*. The slow introduction in this early overture shows the influence of both Mozart's 39th and Beethoven's Second symphonies with its upward-rushing passages for strings.

It may be that Spohr composed the work as a "trial run" for the overture he wrote later the same year for his first opera. But Spohr's well-known admiration for Mozart does not seem to have influenced the overture to **Die Prüfung**, the operetta (as Spohr called this light one-act piece) he composed in the autumn of 1806. After rehearsing the opera in Gotha where he was music director, Spohr decided to shelve it but published its D major overture separately. In his catalogue of works he originally gave it the opus number 14 but the publisher printed it as Op. 15. Later, when this number was assigned to a set of string quartets, Spohr amended the overture to Op. 15a. The plot of the opera, one of the "test of love" routine to its period, calls forth a sparkling overture which shows a close study of the French school, especially Cherubini whose *Les Deux Journées* was the work which inspired Spohr to become a composer in the first place. Actually the Cherubini overture brought to mind here is the one to *Faniska* but that must be a coincidence as both overtures were composed at about the same time in 1806. Once more, the slow introduction is recalled at the centre of Spohr's overture though in general it is a lively piece with little of the legendary Spohr melancholy.

Spohr's next operatic foray, *Alruna*, composed in the summer and autumn of 1808, utilised his other idol Mozart as model but even though the work was accepted by Goethe for production at Weimar Spohr came to view it as unsuccessful and managed to get it withdrawn. Not so the overture, however, of which he was particularly proud and continued to programme it for many years to come. The Mozart model here is a direct one as Spohr admitted in his memoirs: "Of the overture to *Alruna*, the same Breslauer critic says: 'It is not free from reminiscences.' He might have said right out, it is an exact imitation of the Overture to the *Zauberflöte*; for that was the object I had in view. In my admiration of Mozart, and the feeling of wonder with which I regarded that overture, an imitation of it seemed to me something very natural and praiseworthy, and at the time when I sought to develop my talent for composition I had made many similar imitations of Mozart's masterpieces, and among others that of the aria full of love-complaints in *Alruna*, imitated from the beautiful aria of Pamina *Ach, ich fühls, es ist verschwunden* ... I retained even up to a later period, a predilection for that imitation of the overture to the *Zauberflöte*, and still consider it as one of my best and most effective instrumental compositions. Neither is it so slavish an imitation as to contain nothing of my own invention; for instance, the striking modulations in the introductory *Adagio*, and the second fugue-theme with which the second half of the *Allegro* begins, and which then is so happily connected with the chief theme. The instrumentation, also, though quite in the Mozart style, has nevertheless some original characteristics."⁴ His pride in his achievement kept him loyal to the overture despite often discouraging notices such as this one of June 20 1810: "Almost with every new bar, one *inganno* succeeded the other, so that it may be looked upon as a connected series of studies in modulation. Probably, this restlessness, this vacillation, has reference to the character of the *Alruna* for which this drama was written. Great, however as the effect of this overture may certainly be in a theatre, yet as concert music it did not appear to make the impression that might have been expected from its execution by so good and numerous an orchestra. This result can be explained in no other way than, in as much as continuously disappointed hopes depress the spirits and make the mind uneasy, so a music which to the end disappoints the expectations of the ear, never satisfies. A profusion of crooked and sometimes rough passages, leading to no object, to no repose, and to no further enjoyment, in which the composer merely keeps the mind of the hearer in suspense become at length wearisome."⁵

In 1810 Spohr was one of four composers invited to set an opera libretto for the Hamburg impresario Friedrich Ludwig Schröder. Spohr's setting of *Der Zweikampf mit der Gellebten* was adjudged the best of these and the opera was accordingly premièred on November 15 1811 — the first of his operas to be produced. Again the model is Mozart but the overture is far more independent of Spohr's idol than that to *Alruna*.

This fine piece is perhaps the nearest Spohr came to the tradition of "sturm und drang" familiar to us from a number of Haydn's minor key symphonies. In this case it is E minor which always seems to evoke from Spohr some of his best work. It conjures up the cliff-hanging plot of the opera, one in the Italian *semi-seria* category in which the heroine, disguised as a man, is poised to fight a duel against her lover before, in the nick of time, all is made clear.

With *Faust* (1813) we reach the mature Spohr. Unusually, for our composer, there is no slow introduction; we are plunged into a whirl of activity involving Faust's tormented passions as Spohr himself made clear in a note attached

to the first printed libretto⁶: "The composer has tried to present in the overture a musical impression of the circumstances of Faust's life. In the *Allegro vivace* it is Faust's sensual life and the riot of debauchery that is suggested. With satiety comes an awakening of his better self, and pricks of conscience, though these are overwhelmed by the return of sensual impulses. In the *Largo grave* he at last pulls himself together and seriously attempts to renounce the evil of his ways; and in the *fugato* there is a suggestion of good resolutions being formed. It is not long, however, before he is again the prey of new and stronger sensual temptations (*tempo primo*) and, blinded by the deceptive power of the Evil One, he abandons himself more completely than ever to the most uncontrolled desires." It should be noted that the published score of the overture has the tempo marking *Andante maestoso* at the point which Spohr refers to as *Largo grave*. The entry of the three trombones is reserved for this point, no doubt modelled on Mozart's dramatic use of these instruments in *Don Giovanni*. The move towards evil is signified by the move from C major to C minor; Spohr reverses the usual course of a classical overture which often starts in the minor and ends in the major.

In keeping with a cantata composed to celebrate victory over Napoleon in the Battle of Leipzig, **Das befreite Deutschland**, written in Vienna between January and March 1814, the tonal movement of its overture goes from a lamenting C minor to a triumphant C major (and so follows the tradition of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the quintessential "abstract" orchestral work in this mode), thus being symbolic of the change in the fortunes of war. The overture, therefore, is a straightforward scene-setter and as such also gave Spohr the pattern for his later oratorio overtures.

For his next opera, **Zemire und Azor** (composed in Frankfurt from September 1818 to February 1819) Spohr devised a fine overture which was interrupted by the stage action. It is designed to be played with the curtain already up and some characters on stage. After a lilting slowish introduction the body of the overture introduces a storm. Halfway through a chorus of spirits joins in and a scene complex continues with recitative. This makes it difficult to extract this particular overture as a concert item though 19th century piano arrangements were published.

Shortly before concluding his spell as Music Director of the Frankfurt Opera at the end of September 1819 Spohr had accepted an engagement with the Philharmonic Society of London for the 1820 season. It was the custom with the Society for eminent musicians to be commissioned to provide an overture for their exclusive use with the Society retaining the autograph score. Thus, among others, Beethoven, Cherubini and Mendelssohn complied. Spohr was no exception and worked on the **Große Concertoverture in F major** even before leaving Frankfurt so he was able to perform it on November 29 1819 at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. It did not receive its London première during Spohr's visit to England because of pressure of other works; that was delayed until March 12 1821 when it was conducted by Ferdinand Ries, the former Beethoven pupil who negotiated Spohr's engagement on behalf of the Philharmonic Society. Its second performance at the Philharmonic concerts was more than 50 years later when W.G. Cusins conducted it on May 4 1874. A more recent revival came when it was broadcast by the BBC on April 5 1984, Spohr's birthday, as part of the bicentenary celebrations; Norman del Mar conducted the BBC Scottish Orchestra. The *Adagio molto* introduction in the tonic minor includes the germ of the overture's main motif. As Clive Brown says, it "seems like a flexing of muscles"⁷ for the soon-to-be-written Second Symphony. The overture, which includes three trombones, inhabits the same sound world as the symphony and is notable for the recapitulation starting with the second subject, something not uncommon in Spohr's violin concertos but less usual in his overtures though he later followed this practice in those to *Jessonda*, *Der Berggeist* and *Der Alchymist*.

With **Jessonda** (composed in Kassel, April to December, 1822) Spohr scored his biggest operatic success and consequently the overture, published as Op.63, has been perhaps the most often played of them all. It immediately signals the plot's conflict between the Brahmins and the Portuguese by alternating their respective motifs in the slow introduction which is developed into a sophisticated complex of its own. This is not just a question of themes; instead, the whole colouring and orchestration as well as the time signatures are starkly contrasted with the use of the temple music of the Brahmins and the Portuguese army's military music. The body of the overture has a main theme derived from a figure in *Jessonda*'s final aria "Hohe Götter". There is no real development section but, as in the F major overture, the second subject is recapitulated first. This second subject is itself a remarkable creation in which Spohr adapts for orchestra an idea he had tried out in the finale of his Piano and Wind Quintet of two years earlier; that is, to have a lively motif on the strings with a chorale-like phrase sounding out at the same time on the wind instruments. This ploy was used many years later by Bruckner in the finale of his Third Symphony when he joins a polka with a chorale.

The overture to his opera **Der Berggeist**, Op.73 (composed in Kassel, May to December 1824) opens with music that serves a dual purpose; it is both ceremonial "utility" music as commissioned for the wedding of Princess Marie of Hesse to Duke Bernhard of Saxe-Meiningen, and dramatic in function by giving an immediate hint of the opera's happy ending. But the overture is dominated by the chromatic music associated with the *Berggeist* himself though the catchy second subject, which represents the human side of things and is again recapitulated first, shows that Spohr was well able to write popular tunes when he wished.

Spohr wrote his overture to **Macbeth**, Op.75 and some entractes in April 1825 following a commission from

Count Friedrich Brühl for a performance of Shakespeare's play at the Berliner Schauspielhaus in a German version by Samuel Heinrich Spiker (1786-1856). The gloomy colouring of the overture is enhanced not only by the B minor tonality but by Spohr's omission of the brighter-toned trumpets as well as the inclusion of four horns and three trombones along with the timpani. It is one of Spohr's best overtures but that grumpy composer and critic Carl Friedrich Zelter, director of the Berlin Singakademie, wrote to his old friend Goethe that "the composer is a talented fellow but if it were not so much of a good thing it all might be better" and so pre-echoing his 1829 letter to Goethe about the Berlin première of Spohr's *Faust* in which he said that everything was put together "with the precision of a beehive." One gets the feeling that Zelter felt that the broader effect was lost in the fine detail but that is certainly not the impression this particular overture makes today.

With the overtures to his oratorios **Die letzten Dinge** (England: **The Last Judgment**) (composed in Kassel, October 1825 to February 1826) and *Des Heilands letzte Stunden* (England: *Calvary*) Spohr had a different intention from that involving his operatic overtures. In these the aim is to encapsulate the core of the drama or provide a dramatic prelude to the action, sometimes using motives from the opera proper. The oratorio overtures, however, set out to create in the listener a mood suitable for the opening stages of the works. Such things in *Die letzten Dinge* as the arrival of Judgment Day are not part of the plan of the overture; that is dealt with by an extended orchestral section at the appropriate point in the oratorio. The imposing mood established at the start of the overture changes to smoother contrapuntal writing; awe and submission as expressed in the first chorus "Preis und Ehre ihm" (Praise his awful Name, or in more modern English, awe-filled Name). The **Sinfonia to Part Two** is a full-scale overture of 289 bars. Its main theme is an extrapolation from the subject of No.16 "So ihr mich von ganzen Herzen suchet" (If with your whole hearts), a fugally treated chorus which is prefigured at the central point in the Sinfonia when the prevailing *Allegro* tempo changes to *Andante Grave* and the fugato later used in the chorus appears here before a *Tempo primo* recapitulation of the main material.

The overture to the opera **Pietro von Abano, Op.76** (composed in Kassel, February to August, 1827) features in its slow introduction the music which will be used for the chorus of invisible spirits associated with the bringing to life of the dead Cécilie by the evil magician Pietro; the exact spot in the opera which led to its being banned in many centres for alleged immorality. This leads to a stormy F minor *Allegro* but the mysterious opening returns in the centre of the overture before the build-up to the recapitulation and a dramatic lead-in to the opera proper.

The finest of all Spohr's overtures is probably that to his opera **Der Alchymist** (written in Kassel, October 1829 to April 1830) in which the composer works with Spanish dance rhythms associated with the opera's plot, based on Washington Irving's story "The Student of Salamanca." The slow introduction introduces the alchemist's own motif and in the *Allegro moderato* both main subjects are in Spanish dance style, once again showing that Spohr could write in popular vein when it suited him. This ought to be a prime candidate for popularity were overtures still featured in modern concert programmes.

Spohr's most unusual overture is that to **Des Heilands letzte Stunden** (England: *Calvary*), 61 bars of *Andante grave* which establishes the mood for this Passion oratorio, composed between spring 1834 and January 1835. Three times the main time signature is interrupted by a stately, chorale-like phrase in 3/2. Only in the closing stages of the oratorio is the symbolism of this exposed when (No.34) Joseph of Arimathea sings to it the words "Er war der Christ, der Sohn des Hochgelobten" (He was the Christ, the Son of the Almighty) which is then echoed by the Chorus of Disciples.

When we come to the **Die Tochter der Luft** fantasia in the form of a concert overture, composed in November 1836, Spohr relates: "In the course of the year 1836 I wrote also ... a fantasia in the shape of an overture to Raupach's mythological tragedy *Die Tochter der Luft* (The Daughter of the Air) which was shortly afterwards performed at one of our subscription concerts. But as in this shape it did not altogether please me, I afterwards worked it up as the first movement of my fifth symphony."⁸ The overture was also performed at the Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts early in 1837 and a set of orchestral parts was listed in Spohr's library at his death. Since then it has disappeared but, like a number of other Spohr "disappearances", may well come to light in a private collection. However, the music is not lost for Spohr has left it in writing, as quoted above, that he used it in the first movement of his fifth symphony. It has been put on the record that Spohr added a slow introduction to the overture to turn it into the symphony movement. That means that the "big tune" which appears at the centre of this movement was there in the overture so that the material for the introduction must have been extrapolated from it. This would explain why Spohr called the overture a "Fantasie"; if the tune arrives from "nowhere" then it is not a symphonic development of earlier material and hence a "fantasy". The addition of the slow introduction in No.5 was therefore necessary by Spohr's formal standards in order to give the tune a symphonic provenance. In his revision Spohr must also have added the "first-time" bars when adding the exposition repeat. Again, a lead back towards both the opening and the development was not catered for in the original conception and we have gained one of Spohr's longest "lead-back" passages. It should be pointed out that Raupach's play was a translated version of one of the mythological tragedies by the Spanish dramatist Pedro Calderon de la Barca (1600-

1681) and dates from 1829. Shortly afterwards Spohr met Ernst Nejamin Salome Raupach (1784-1852) while taking the waters at Marienbad in the summer of 1833. Spohr's memoirs recall: "Among the visitors at the baths we met Raupach of Berlin, with whom I took frequent long walks, during which he related to me many things relating to his approaching theatrical labours. He was at that time full of a new drama which he was going to write immediately upon his return home, in which he intended to lash the ill-natured and hypocrites, and the scene of which he had laid in China. But he probably never completed it, or perhaps the ill-natured ones of Berlin found means to prevent its representation, for so far as I know, no piece of the kind from the pen of Raupach was ever made public."⁹

A play by Carl Birnbaum (1803-1865), **Der Matrose**, was staged at the Kassel theatre on January 9, 1839 and for this production four local composers contributed to the incidental music. Spohr provided the overture, a song and the finale (composed October-November 1838), Moritz Hauptmann (1792-1868) and Ernst Grenzebach (1812-?) added songs and Johann Christian Baldewin (1784-1847) wrote some choruses. In keeping with a non-tragic stage piece, Spohr's overture is in a relaxed A major and 3/4 time, without a slow introduction, designed to put the audience in a good mood for the rise of the curtain. After his death, his pupil Carl Rundnagel edited a four-hand piano arrangement which was published by Schott in 1874.

Unlike the overtures to the other oratorios, Spohr returns to a more operatic concept in **Der Fall Babylons** (England: **The Fall of Babylon**), composed December 1839 to December 1840, in keeping with its more dramatic style of libretto. The 24-bar slow introduction *Andante* uses the material of the opening Chorus of Jews "Gott unsrer Väter" (God of our Fathers), a lament by the banks of the Euphrates. In the *Allegro moderato* the second subject uses the military march music associated with Cyrus's victorious Persian army (on the side of the good in this particular work), including a side drum, an exotic touch of instrumentation as far as Spohr's overtures are concerned.

Spohr's final overture is the **Concertouvertüre im ernsten Styl in D major, Op.126** dating from December 1842. We have expressed the view¹⁰ that this was a response to those who criticised the finale of his *Historical Symphony* as falling to the level of the music it intended to satirise. In a letter to a friend immediately after completing the overture Spohr said that it was composed in a new way but he did not mention the title which was, therefore, possibly thought up later. Again, and for the last time, we have the slow introduction returning in the centre of the overture.

With his final opera **Die Kreuzfahrer** which he wrote between September 1843 and May 1844 Spohr jettisoned the formal overture. Instead there are just 43 bars of introduction for the orchestra which leads into a soldiers' chorus (of Crusaders); an attempt to thrust the audience directly into the on-stage action.

Notes

1. *Verzeichnis der Werke Spohrs* (included in *Ludwig Spohr. Ein Vortrag*. Leipzig, 1881)
2. *The Letters of a Leipzig Cantor* (London, 1892). Vol.II, Page 217
3. *Ibid.* Vol.I, Page 13
4. *Louis Spohr's Autobiography* (English translation, London, 1865). Page 130
5. *Ibid.* Page 142-143
6. Vienna, 1814
7. *Louis Spohr: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge, 1984) Page 134
8. *Autobiography*. Page 201
9. *Ibid.* Page 184
10. *Spohr Journal Nineteen*, 1992, Page 8