

MY LIFE WITH LOUIS: REFLECTIONS OF A SPOHR CLARINETTIST

by John Denman

PART I

IT WAS in 1969 when I moved south of the Thames to Beckenham in Kent; little did I know I should be a fairly close neighbour to Maurice Powell and his friends of the Spohr Society of Great Britain. I'm very pleased to say that Maurice found me and aroused my interest in the works of Louis Spohr. Actually, I had all four clarinet concertos in clarinet and piano form but had never sought to perform them, for as we all thought, the orchestral material was lost save for No.1 which was then rarely played. What set me on the trail to seek out the missing scores was a very old crackly cassette taken from some German radio broadcast of Oskar Drappel playing the fourth concerto (the large orchestration, I think). Maurice played this for me and made a copy which sounded even worse. Nonetheless, I could study the orchestration and appreciate what beautiful scoring was contained within.

My other source of inspiration came from Rendall's *The Clarinet*, Lady Mayer's book *The Forgotten Master*, and Pamela Weston's description of Hermstedt, Spohr's clarinetist friend, in *Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past*. It was later that I obtained Spohr's autobiography. Maurice also let me hear a violin concerto — a startling piece. I cannot remember which one it was but it sounded fiendishly difficult — without wishing to be unkind, almost too difficult for the soloist. But I was once again attracted by the sound of the orchestration. My son Mark, now a professional violinist (born April 5) became very interested in Spohr's music and the two of us together with my father began to look for the violin tutor (*Violinschule*) that Spohr had written. I forget where we discovered it but I for one found the whole book very interesting and sensible. I remember one passage very distinctly: "Do not hold the violin low — do not hunch the shoulders and do not make grimaces with the face." Now, as I sit in the orchestra I see and hear the seemingly endless chain of violin soloists, most of them giving the impression that what they are doing is very difficult simply by doing all those things that Spohr did not like; then again, in all my years as an orchestral player, not one solo violinist has trotted out a Spohr violin concerto. I've asked a few of them if they played Spohr. Some have answered "good teaching pieces", others "too difficult!", most affirm "good practise but not good box office".

"Good practise", I must admit, was my first impression of the clarinet concertos for at the age of 16 I could play them all — after a fashion! I had found them one sunny afternoon in London at Musica Rara just up the rickety staircase in Newport Court. This was while I was on leave from my regiment, the Life Guards. My teacher, George Garside, had never let me play Weber's works, stating that they were "jossy". He frowned slightly when I played Spohr No.3 to him, saying I was "fast enough already", and needed "slow practise". He described my efforts at No.3 as "spewing round the clarinet". I decided to work on the concertos anyway and not tell him, and so I learnt the works myself and derived great pleasure from doing so.

Maurice Powell and I became part of the Buffet-Crampon UK team, Maurice with brass and I, given the fancy title of Technical Adviser, to help to turn out instruments for the UK market. This I did for some years — trips to Paris ensued and I found myself starting to ferret around in libraries and places such as the Bibliotheque Nationale and the Conservatoire looking for Spohr scores.

Although I found several pieces, no luck with Spohr, but I knew they were somewhere, for one of Garside's students, Mike Farnham, claimed he had George Clinton's scores from the old Crystal Palace Orchestra days, before the great fire destroyed the Crystal Palace in 1936. Mike, understandably, wanted to save the scores for himself and would not share his treasure. This made me all the more determined.

My professorship at Trinity College and my association with the librarian there led me to Jane Harrington, head librarian at the Royal Academy of Music. Jane showed me some uncatalogued music lying around on dusty shelves. She had previously shown me a locked cabinet full of choral music belonging to the Royal Choral Society, claiming that many of Spohr's choral works were there. Could I see? — NO! She did not have the key. Only the Society had a key. Well, I thought, blow off the dust and start looking! I cannot say that much of the music interested me and just at the time I was once again losing heart (a familiar state of mind then, for I had been searching for months) there it was, the score and parts of No.1. I was so excited that I broke the binding and had to suffer some scathing remarks from my host; this over, I went on. Yes, No.2, all there. I begged Jane for photocopies and she agreed, if 1. I calmed down, and 2. Did not touch the score. I went home that day with photocopies.

The subsequent recording of No.2 went well and was issued by Oryx Records. Hazel Vivienne conducted the orchestra from the English National Opera and the whole project seemed to be very successful. The Spohr was coupled with Carl Stamitz No.3 and it was this record that eventually won for me a job in America as professor of clarinet.

The third concerto I found in Vienna at the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. Again, this was not in Spohr's own hand

but a good clear copy of the work. This was eventually delivered to me on microfilm. Luckily, our third horn at the ENO, Barry North, was well acquainted with the reproduction of microfilm for his wife worked at Scotland Yard (MI5, I believe). In a few weeks the score and parts were ready and I played the concerto first with the BBC Welsh Symphony; the only other British performance was with the BBC Philharmonic some five years later, Gunther Herbig conducting. At the rehearsal I stopped him in the last movement. "Gunther, the BBC is hiring this music from me at £3 per minute. It's too fast and I get more money if we play slower." He replied: "I don't think this score is worth £3 per minute." Nice happy sort!

I've played the third in America and more recently in Melbourne. It was actually in Melbourne that I played No.4 for the first time. Hunter Fry provided the score and parts. They are the same as I have at home, a Brahms sized orchestra with three trombones, four horns and double winds and trumpets. Both our scores came from Leipzig. My score has a title page stating the editor's name "Rischka". Who he was I don't know and cannot find any trace of his work other than my score. Perhaps some kindly scholar could help?

Hunter Fry was perhaps the strongest influence on me in recent years to record the third and fourth concertos. This I did in Christmas week 1994 with the Royal Philharmonic on their label for Pickwick.

Hunter also provided a copy of the autograph of the Alruna Variations, complete with a set of parts originally published by Phillip. These parts did not match the autograph; I noticed also that the solo part was very different from the Voxman edition of Musica Rara. Thus my wife Paula, cum record producer, came to the rescue by playing the autograph into the computer. A similar situation arose in the case of the Potpourri on Themes of Winter. Again Hunter provided a set of parts published by Schlesinger during Spohr's lifetime. Once again the parts were full of mistakes, extra bars and obvious wrong notes. Once again Paula came to the rescue but full marks to Hunter Fry for providing copies of these valuable treasures.

PART II

PREPARING for such a venture; the organisation of arranging dates, a good hall and a first-class sound recordist took some 11 months from proposal to finished DAT master. Most of this was done with Paula directly in contact with RPO Special Projects Manager Andrew Connolly. The number of sessions involved had to correspond to timings of the pieces, varied orchestrations and union rules. Four sessions were booked.

My task? Well, practise, of course. This I did, a happy task, really. The notes I know well and the music? Yes, I think I had performed all the pieces before but recording is so different from the live performance. The soloist has to be spot on for every take for the orchestra is perhaps seeing the music for the first time; any fluffed passages or even out of tune notes have to be done again. Therefore the solo part is only any good when the accompaniment is good too. In the case of all this material, it must be realised that the orchestral parts are extremely testing and very transparent; because of Spohr's fine part writing every wind instrument is heard clearly and the strings are kept busy throughout the whole range of notes.

I also wanted a conductor who had exceptional qualities as an accompanist. I asked Robert Bernhardt, the director of music for our orchestra here in Tucson. Bob has conducted the Boston and Pittsburgh and many other American orchestras. He also conducts opera. Because of this I felt he would warm to my style of playing and would certainly catch the operatic moments without too much trouble.

It has been said that the third concerto is a portrait in music of the flamboyant Hermstedt. Perhaps so. I took it to be so. I also had to ask myself; did Spohr make a mistake in his autobiography when he speaks of the long note squeaking amid the fumes of champagne? The dates do not tally and yet I cannot think of any other piece that starts so.¹ Elsewhere I've read of Hermstedt's capacity for high notes, long phrases and fast finger and tongue technique. So, looking at the outer movements in No.3, there is plenty to challenge the soloist or even to accommodate the volatility of such a person as Hermstedt.

The slow movement (in binary form) provides what I consider to be a direct quotation from Mozart; it is neither the Mozart clarinet concerto melody nor that of the quintet but rather a mixture of both. Certainly the deceptive or interrupted cadences come as they do in the Mozart quintet. The second subject is a very cleverly devised bass melody with singing clarinet above, being in complete contrast to our Mozartian beginning. Is there truth when we read "Hermstedt asked for a third concerto" saying "he had only the first two and his beloved Mozart"? Was Spohr having a friendly joke with his clarinettist?

The fourth concerto is quite different for it is a much more beautiful piece and quite dramatic in an operatic way. The exposition, of course, tells us all of what is to come, flowing melodies and fanfare-like brass writing interspersed with descending running scales in the strings. The clarinet part for clarinet in A poses different problems from any of the other three concertos. The themes and passagework go through many of the A clarinet's bad notes, especially those above the staff which tend to be sharp. The short broken chords of the third concerto are replaced by running scales in the fourth, the whole musical picture becoming more florid and expressive. The slow movement reminds me of the Magic Flute with its symbolic three double chords, as in the overture; but then perhaps Spohr was thinking more of Tamino's aria, for when the clarinet enters, it is this aria I have in mind when I play. The form is the same again, just

like numbers two and three. Spohr, I believe, did say that he had discovered the perfect concerto slow movement form? I find this movement very awkward to bring off for it explores all the wheezy notes on any of my A clarinets.

In the Rondo Espagnol Spohr's mastery of orchestration shows him to be well ahead of any of his contemporaries. The second subject provides the soloist with some relief and a chance to sing. Later the "song" is used in double tempo to provide the soloist with some really bravura playing.

In preparation for these concertos I kept in mind several things; 1. To play like a violinist. 2. Not to take too many liberties and thereby cheapen the music. 3. To keep the music at a fair pace, other than in the slow movements. It seems I recollect Spohr consistently saying that fast movements went too slowly and slow movements were played too quickly.² Sensible, I suppose, but it still happens today. I enjoyed immensely the delicate scoring of the two shorter pieces. After playing them for years with piano accompaniment I was quite amazed by the texture of the orchestral score, a lesson by example perhaps of how to score for small orchestra.

Editing is so important. Mike Skeet, our sound recordist, had constantly nagged us all for silences between takes. Nonetheless, noises did occur, creaking floorboards, 747s overhead, and at one point a door burst open, a truck driver trying to make a delivery. Hugh Bean, our leader, shouted a few sharp words to him. In fact, Hugh was a tower of strength throughout; so too was our conductor who went to work methodically and musically despite jet lag and lack of sleep caused by Christmas party revellers at our hotel.

We edited over Christmas. Hours ticked by and at one point I fell asleep with my headphones on! But in spite of all the listening before us Paula managed to put Christmas dinner into Mike Skeet's oven and so we spent all of Christmas listening to Spohr.

Now it is all done and will soon be in the hands of the record buyers. My thanks go to Chris Tutt and friends for help in providing photos and for sound advice on scores. In conclusion, I was so excited about the recordings that I decided to write a sort of chatty letter for the Journal; not a scholarly offering but rather a brief picture of my Spohr clarinet endeavours. This is it.

Notes

1. Louis Spohr's *Autobiography*. English edition of 1865. Vol.1, page 155-157

2. *Ibid* Vol.1, page 211 and Vol.2, page 335