

THE STORY OF SPOHR'S 10TH VIOLIN CONCERTO

by Keith Warsop

SPOHR referred to his Violin Concerto No.10 in A major, Op.62¹ as his "Paradepferd" or "showpiece"² and a study of the creation and development of this work provides a fascinating insight into the composer's workshop. Altogether, the story involves not only three versions of the concerto itself but also three of Spohr's other violin concertos as well as an unfinished one. These are:

1. Adagio from Concerto in A major, WoO.12, composed 1802-03, revised 1804
2. Recitative and Adagio from Concerto No.6 in G minor, Op.28, composed January 1809
3. D minor introduction from Concerto-movement in D major, WoO.16, composed 1809
4. First version of Concerto No.10 with Adagio in D major, WoO.17, composed summer 1810
5. Revision of Concerto No.10, undertaken in autumn 1810
6. Adagio from Concerto No.9 in D minor, Op.55, composed 1820 or earlier
7. Published version of Concerto No.10, issued by Peters of Leipzig, May 1824

Our survey begins with the Concerto in A major, WoO.12, first published by Bärenreiter in 1955 in an edition by Folker Göthel based on a set of copyist's manuscript parts in the Kassel Murhardt-Bibliothek. Göthel accepted at face value Spohr's comment in his memoirs that he composed the work in Brunswick in the summer of 1804 and accordingly allocates that date to the concerto in the introduction to his edition and in his Spohr thematic catalogue. Spohr wrote: "In order to prepare myself well for a future journey, I again applied myself diligently to composition. Thus I wrote the Concerto in D minor which was published by Kühnel of Leipzig as Op.2, a Potpourri upon chosen themes (published also by the same as Op.5) and a Concerto in A major which has remained in manuscript [...]. In this manner passed the summer of 1804." However, according to Hartmut Becker in his notes accompanying the Ulf Hoelscher recording of the work on CPO, in 1992 Franziska Rinckens, a researcher for the Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft, found another set of manuscript parts in the Leipzig City Music Library which contained not only autograph sections but was clearly older than the Kassel manuscript. Becker concluded that as the string parts were divided into a solo quartet and ripieno parts for the tutti in the manner of the Mannheim School, Spohr wrote this earlier version in 1802 or 1803 during his studies with Franz Eck on the journey to or in St. Petersburg.

In that case, the work on the concerto during the summer of 1804 was probably a revision which would explain the differences in matters of detail between the two versions. The only record of Spohr's performing the concerto was in a concert in Berlin on March 2nd, 1805 when it won praise from the composer and critic Johann Friedrich Reichardt, especially the finale. That same year, Spohr's highly-praised Concerto No.2 in D minor was published and in view of that work's great success perhaps the composer felt that a later publication of the A major would then have appeared as a retrograde step in his development; whatever his reasons, Spohr kept the work by him in manuscript as we shall discover as our story proceeds.

Shortly after composing his Clarinet Concerto No.1 in C minor towards the close of 1808 for the virtuoso Johann Simon Hermstedt, Spohr tells us: "I took it over to him myself to Sondershausen at the end of January and initiated him in the way to execute it. On this occasion I appeared also as violinist at a concert given by Hermstedt and played for the first time my Concerto in G minor, Op.28 which I had just finished a few days before." Spohr goes on to mention the well-known story that the melodies in the violin concerto's finale were "genuine Spanish. I heard them from a Spanish soldier who was quartered in my house and who sang to the guitar. I noted down what pleased me and wove it into my Rondo. In order to give this a more Spanish character I copied the guitar accompaniments as I had heard them from the Spaniard into the orchestral part."³ However, Spohr does not mention the slow movement of the concerto whose form of a recitative and aria also made a big impression, so much so that arrangements of it abounded, for flute, clarinet, viola and piano among others. This movement begins *Recitative: Andante*, moves on to a short *Allegro molto* and then the aria begins *Adagio*. Before the restatement of the aria there is a brief return to the recitative.

Later in 1809 Spohr started work on another violin concerto, in D major, WoO.16, which began with

a 28-bar D minor slow introduction but when he had completed the bulk of the first movement totalling 276 bars he abandoned the project. The autograph, now in the Murhardt Bibliothek in Kassel, shows that Spohr, in keeping with the D major tonality, planned a resplendent orchestration with two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings. A copy of this movement, in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, contains a completion by the violin pedagogue Otto Seeger.

At last we come to the 10th Concerto on which Spohr worked during the summer of 1810. To start with, he used the slow introduction to the unfinished D major movement of 1809, transposing it to A minor and reducing the size of the orchestra by eliminating the oboes and trumpets. The autograph of this first version, which passed to Spohr's friend, the Frankfurt banker and amateur composer Wilhelm Speyer who in turn gave it to Joachim, is now in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek and has been reproduced in facsimile in Dr. Clive Brown's Garland Edition of Selected Works of Louis Spohr, Volume Seven, Concertos (New York, 1987). This version has, remarkably, quiet endings to both first and last movements. The D major adagio, which appears separately in Göthel's thematic catalogue as WoO.17, can be heard on Ulf Hoelscher's recording for CPO which, incongruously, retains the timpani here, while using the final published form of the outer movements where they are discarded! In the autumn of that same year of 1810 Spohr began to revise the concerto, writing to the publisher Kühnel on November 24th (as quoted in Dr. Brown's introduction to his Garland volume): "I would also have sent the concerto at the same time if I had not thought it necessary to simplify much in the solo part in order to make the concerto more suitable for general use. Also, in the accompaniment, I have eliminated some difficult passages; I now have to write it out again and will play it on the Prince's birthday on the 28th." This performance was in a Gotha court concert and the prince referred to was Friedrich von Gotha. For this version, along with the type of revisions mentioned in his letter, Spohr removed the timpani and amended the conclusions of the first and last movements to *forte*. His autograph of the first movement of this version is today in the archives of the Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft in Kassel. In his early performances of this revised version Spohr presumably retained the D major adagio but omitted the timpani. Perhaps it was their absence that led him to feel that the movement was less effective but for whatever reason he became dissatisfied with it and for a performance in Rudolstadt on October 7th 1812 he substituted the "recitative and aria" from Concerto No.6.

The 1810 negotiations for publication with Kühnel fell through when Spohr asked for 75 Thalers but in 1815 he made another attempt to get the concerto into print. On August 28th he offered it to Kühnel's successor in Leipzig, Peters, for 20 Friedrichsdor but again nothing resulted. Meanwhile, Spohr continued to perform the concerto and at some stage composed a new slow movement for it. Soon after he arrived in England in 1820 he wrote to Speyer that he played the A major concerto at a "Vocal Concert" in the "very fine" Hanover Square Rooms on April 14th,⁴ almost certainly with the latest adagio so that the London audience were unknowingly hearing what became one of Spohr's most highly-praised slow movements. Back in Germany that August while staying with his parents in Gandersheim, near Brunswick, Spohr began to write his Concerto No.9 for a planned visit to Paris that winter but suddenly received an invitation to direct a music festival in Quedlinburg on October 13th and 14th. "I very gladly accepted it and made all haste to complete my concerto so as to be able to perform it there for the first time," he wrote in his memoirs. Pressed for time, Spohr incorporated into the new work the last adagio he had written for the A major concerto, thus leaving that composition again without an approved slow movement. The Ninth Concerto proved a huge success and was immediately adjudged one of Spohr's greatest masterpieces with publication quickly following from André of Offenbach in 1822.

This success brought the commercially astute Peters back to the bargaining table. He who had rejected the A major in 1815 was now anxious to feature a new Spohr concerto in his list. But, at the start of 1822, Spohr had taken up his new post in Kassel and when he heard from Peters, was busy with the composition of and performance preparations for *Jessonda* so the publisher had to be content with the A major concerto. Spohr also explained to Peters that he would have to provide a new slow movement as the latest one had been published as part of Concerto No.9 and he found the original D major one no longer satisfactory. Pressed for time, he eventually extracted the adagio from the A major concerto, WoO.12 and, with a few minor articulation and bowing revisions, incorporated that into the other A major which finally appeared in print in May 1824 as the 10th Concerto, Op.62.

It remains to correct a bad error of interpretation in this violin concerto in an often-cited survey. In his chapter on Spohr in *The Violin Concerto: A Study in German Romanticism* (University of North Carolina Press, 1941), Benjamin F. Swalin writes about the 10th concerto as follows on Page 17: "The irregular first movement (Adagio-Allegro) is not in the sonata form. There is a bare suggestion of the return of the main theme in the dominant major key (measure 209); and a derivative theme is observed in the coda. The second theme appears but once in the movement (measure 157)." His analysis is completely misleading. Whether the movement is in sonata form as laid down in textbooks and interpreted by musicologists is one thing; that it fits in well with Spohr's other sonata-form movements is beyond doubt. A knowledge of Spohr's works outside the violin concertos will tell us immediately what is going on here. There are three factors in the movement which have confused Swalin. What he describes as the second theme "which appears but once" is in fact "the new theme in the development" which we know from Spohr's first two clarinet concertos (1808 and 1810) and a work as late as the 15th violin concerto of 1844. Most famously, the procedure appears in the first movement of Mozart's A major piano concerto K.488. Secondly, we have Haydn's favourite ploy when reaching the area and key of the second subject group: the reappearance of the first subject or a variant of it. Spohr's First clarinet concerto again offers another example of his use of this device. In the 10th concerto this "second subject which is thematically the first" appears at bar 84 while in the recapitulation Spohr daringly leapfrogs over the theme itself, picking up passagework from five bars later to include only the brief reference to it at the section marked *poco a poco ritardando* (bar 253; bar 97 in the exposition). Finally, Swalin is confused by Spohr recalling the material of the adagio introduction at the start of the development, leading to the soloist's new theme. Spohr specialists know that this is one of the composer's best-loved moves, appearing at least as early as the C minor and *Die Prüfung* overtures of 1806 and extending throughout his career. Its most famous use is, of course, by Haydn in his "Drumroll" symphony of 1795 where it heralds the recapitulation, but an earlier and significant appearance is in Viotti's 16th violin concerto in E minor, composed about 1788, a work definitely known to Spohr. Haydn too could have known the Viotti; the two composers shared concert platforms during Haydn's second visit to London and at a time when Mozart prepared trumpet and timpani parts for this very concerto around 1789-90 he was seeing much of Haydn and could have shown the work to the older composer. Whether Spohr planned it as such or not, the first movement of his 10th violin concerto therefore offers a triple tribute to his three heroes and models, Mozart, Haydn and Viotti.

Notes

1. The 10th in order of publication but composed after No.6 and before No.7 though, coincidentally, it is also the 10th in order of composition when taking into account Spohr's three early unnumbered concertos, G major, WoO.9; E minor, WoO. 10; and A major, WoO.12.
2. "Showpiece" for the German "parade horse" is the translation favoured by Clive Brown in his 1984 critical biography. Spohr uses the phrase in a letter to Peters in 1822.
3. Misread by some commentators as applying to the finale of the C minor clarinet concerto and so they find "Spanish elements" there!
4. Translated by Arthur Jacobs in his influential 1950 article "Spohr and the Baton" in *Music and Letters*, xxxi, p.310 (1950). But Jacobs has been led into error by the list of Spohr's concertos in reference works available to him at the time (which gave both the First and the 10th concertos as being in the key of A minor) and adds the footnote "Spohr, or Speyer's biographer, has apparently made a slip here. Spohr wrote no violin concerto in A major."