

# GLENEWINKEL: THE SUMMING-UP

translated by Celia Skrine

*In previous Journals we have featured translations by Celia Skrine of excerpts from Hans Glenewinkel's authoritative dissertation Spohrs Kammermusik für Streichinstrumente: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Streichquartetts im XIX. Jahrhundert (Munich, 1912). In 1990 we printed the section dealing with the two posthumous quartets and in 1992 the quintets and sextet. Here we offer the final pages of the dissertation in which Glenewinkel presents his overall conclusions.*

HAVING examined, in detail and from all aspects, the works which form the subject of this study, we can finally proceed to some observations of a historical and general nature and draw some conclusions. We have already looked at details about the performance history of each of Spohr's quartets and how each was received by the public; it now remains to give a general overview of our findings. The first performances of the quartets always took place in the intimate musical soirées which Spohr regularly gave for close friends throughout his long career. With a few exceptions, no dates or reports survive. In the public concert hall his quartets were well received, yet only a handful remained in favour with audiences and even these disappeared from the programme after a few years, either for intrinsic reasons or because players were apprehensive of their great technical difficulty. Insofar as reports on quartet recitals are available, we encounter the trio Haydn-Mozart-Beethoven as the constant point of reference right from the start, with a host of variable other names, some of which vanish to make way for others. The name of Spohr does appear frequently, but he does not dominate contemporary performance here as much as in other branches of art, nor as much as might be expected considering the high esteem in which he was universally held well into the 1830s. Much more frequently performed was Onslow, the only composer who comes anywhere near the classics in number of performances at the time. Other names which occur relatively often between 1830 and 1850 are Cherubini, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Hummel, Kuhlau, Molière, Fesca, Litloff, and several lesser talents now virtually forgotten, including C.W. Henning, Ed. Frank, Fl. Geyer, J. Weiss, R. Würst, Constantin Decker, Just, Seidel, C. Lührs, Wendt, Täglichsbeck, Stahlknecht and Wichmann. Spohr's quartets seem never to have achieved real popularity; one reason may be their many stylistic shortcomings, but the chief reason is likely to be their failure to appeal to the shallow taste then in fashion. They were played most often in the 1830s and early 1840s, after which the numbers of performances began to decline, at first slowly and then quite rapidly. This is connected with the unhappy turn of events that Spohr experienced in his own lifetime. He stayed put in the mentality of the 1810-1830 epoch; trapped in the values of those days, he did not go along with the further development of romantic music which was associated with names from Chopin, Schumann and Mendelssohn to Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner. In fact he intentionally kept his distance from all these except Mendelssohn. The inner incompatibility between his own sensibilities and those of his contemporaries developed gradually into a gaping chasm. As often happens in the history of the human mind, the early innovator and revolutionary developed into a conservative and reactionary. Of course, all this is to be taken *cum grano salis*, for Spohr certainly did not dig in his heels knowingly or obstinately: he made strenuous efforts to expand his horizons and adapt to the achievements of the younger generation as far as he held them to be compatible with his own conception of art, as is shown by his earnest devotion to programme music and also by occasional innovations in his harmony. But it has to be admitted that he did not move on, and this, combined with the fact that he only wrote one significant work after 1840, was enough to turn the previous adulation of him into bias against him, indeed into blind prejudice which ignored his historical importance and belittled his achievements. This fate hit his quartets particularly hard, so that by the 1850s the musical journals contain virtually no mention of performances of them. Even before his death almost all his chamber works had fallen into oblivion, with only the double quartets showing any sign of life. Today a Spohr performance is a great rarity.

In addition to authenticated performances of individual works, newspapers and journals mention numerous concerts without specifying exactly which works were performed: in most cases the indication of key is not enough to differentiate one quartet from another. In order to complete the facts given above and to present an accurate picture of the coverage given to Spohr's quartets in the concert hall, we list here the year and place of these performances, omitting mention of performers' names, critical reactions and exact dates, even where given, as being of minor interest.<sup>1</sup>

Altona: 1848<sup>2</sup>

Berlin: 1833, 1833/34; 1834; 1836; 1842; 1847; 1850

Cassel: 1829; 1840; 1847

Breslau: 1839

Dresden: 1824 (twice); 1824/25

Halberstadt (music festival): 1833

Prague: 1833; 1838; 1839; 1840; 1942/43; 1843; 1844/45

Prague was a Spohr town *par excellence*, as a review in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* proves: "Perhaps in no other city does Spohr enjoy so many admirers as in Prague. All pianists possess some of the numerous piano scores of his works, and private music-making always includes instrumental quartets or songs by him."

Paris: 1848

St Petersburg: 1845

Quedlinburg (music festival): 1841

Strasburg: 1842 (twice)

Vienna: 1840; 1846; 1849; 1855/56; 1859. Hanslick reports that Johann Hellmesberger included performances of Spohr in 21 out of 150 quartet concerts between 1849 and 1865.

In view of the general lack of any comprehensive and positive awareness of Spohr's quartets, it is not surprising that well-founded overall assessments are few in number. The most detailed is the entry in Grove's Dictionary, written by Paul David. This includes the following sentence: "Although they are the quiet favourites of music lovers of the older generation, they are, with few exceptions, completely unknown to the musicians of today." The reason proposed is the high standard demanded of the modern string quartet: Spohr's are too lacking in stylistic perfection to measure up to these expectations. "Even those which claim to be quartets in the proper sense of the term almost invariably give to the first violin an undue prominence, incompatible with the true quartet-style. The fast movements in particular are full of brilliant, elaborately ornamented passages for the leader, and the finales are quite often written in an antiquated rondo style (à la Polacca). On the other hand, many of the slow movements are of great beauty; and together, in spite of undeniable drawbacks, his quartets contain so much fine and noble music as certainly not to deserve the utter neglect they have fallen into." This critic considers op. 27, op. 29 nos 1-3 and the first double quartet to be the best: "they belong to the period when Spohr's compositional powers were fully developed and his mannerisms were not yet too strongly in evidence".

This verdict is, in general, acceptable, even though Paul David seems not to be familiar with those quartets Spohr wrote in the "pure" quartet style. Another contributor to Grove, Frederick Corder, writes of the quartets' great beauty but criticises the affectation of the harmonies. As with most critics after 1840, the praise of Spohr's virtues is given in few words whereas his weaknesses are treated in the greatest detail.

Th. Helm criticises the excessive subservience to form for form's sake in the scherzos and finales, but complains particularly about the stylistic aberrations. He rates op. 58 no. 1 and the double quartet in D minor

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<sup>1</sup> In this connection I here list all the journals which have been consulted for this dissertation. My researches have not in general extended beyond 1865. - LIST OF JOURNALS WITH DATES

<sup>2</sup> Each date in this list has a footnote giving number and page references to the musical journal carrying mention of an unspecified performance: the *Neue Berliner Musikalische Zeitung*, *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. - Translator]

as the best, followed by one quartet in D minor and one in G major, but without making it clear exactly which ones he means.

Among earlier critical assessments, one by H. Hirschbach is interesting because it plays down the importance of Spohr's quartets as early as 1843: "Spohr achieved much in this realm: an intimate knowledge of his instrument was inevitably useful to him; yet his quartets have not created any sensation, nor do they contain any historical interest, original and expressive though they are." This harsh and unjust verdict gradually became the dominant one. First the quartets were brushed aside; finally people positively recoiled from them.

Numerous "musical histories" provide tragi-comic evidence of how the instinctive prejudice against Spohr, untroubled by any knowledge, continues to rage. Especially reprehensible is the superficial way in which R. Wassermann, in a purportedly learned tome, limits the interest of Spohr's chamber music to the purely historical and declares it to be beyond any enjoyment.<sup>3</sup> One wonders whether the half-baked knowledge on which such judgments are based covers even a tenth of the material concerned.

H. Giehne formulates the problem in a different way; he explains the disappearance of the works from the repertoire simply by their enormous difficulty: "The instrumental soloist as violinist finds his fingers not nimble enough and his bowing not slow enough to be able to embark on the sea of surging notes without fear of drowning. But no one feels sufficiently rewarded by the effect of the performance — characterised by musicians as 'thankless' — to feel inclined to risk his reputation as performer; if one accepts a high level of risk, one naturally wishes for a better result than just emerging unscathed, with luck, from the ordeal.

"Is it then surprising that even in Spohr's lifetime his numerous string quartets had disappeared without trace from violinists' awareness, or that even the pupils of David in Leipzig, when freed from their master's tutelage, can think of no higher priority than to hide Spohr's concertos in the furthest corner, or that the 'many thousands' of German violinists flee at the mere mention of Spohr's name as if their persecutor were already hard on their heels?"

There is obviously much truth in this remark. But the reason behind their rapid disappearance lies neither in their difficulty nor in any defects in Spohr's style — for there are quartets which are excellent in quality and have very little virtuoso character, and are therefore not susceptible to either criticism. The real cause lies much more in the complicated web of reasons that conspired to consign his entire output to such swift oblivion.

When we look back today over the long sequence of quartets and quintets in order to come to as objective a conclusion as possible, we immediately experience conflicting feelings. There is no doubt that their greatest shortcoming is their regrettable stylistic confusion. Moreover, a clear assessment is made more difficult by the very uneven quality of the individual works; some of them reveal the hand of a genius while others barely manage to conceal the lack of inspiration behind a competent use of compositional routine. Perhaps even more troublesome, and a factor detrimental to their chances of surviving, is the fact that even individual quartets contain a mixture of choicest gems and mere dross: for example, in op. 74 no. 1 the first movement is a jewel of a piece, while the other three movements are, relatively speaking, worthless. The ideal homogeneity is missing from a considerable percentage of the works.

If we sort and classify the works among themselves and between genres according to their merit, it becomes clear that the best quartet writing is to be found in those written between 1813 and 1830 and in the double quartets nos 1, 3 and 4. Quartets op. 29 no. 1, op. 58 no. 1 and op. 74 no. 3 may, in my opinion, claim to be the best, and a great number of others are only slightly inferior; furthermore, it must not be forgotten that several of the fairly weak quartets contain individual movements of great beauty and significance. The quintets are, generally speaking, of a less high standard than the quartets: even the best of them, op. 69, does not measure up to the best of the quartets, while the later ones are, at most, mediocre achievements. The sextet attains a highly respectable standard.

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<sup>3</sup> *Louis Spohr als Opernkomponist* (Dissertation, Rostock, 1909)

Apart from sporadic performances of *Jessonda*, the only compositions of Spohr's to survive to the present day are those that he wrote for the violin, his concertos and duets: these will surely long remain indestructible. Yet the quartets are also, in his case, essentially violin pieces, though with greater depth of content and a formal refinement than the violin concertos. When I began my research it was on the assumption that these works must therefore have an important place, indeed a place of honour, in his oeuvre; and this assumption has been shown to be correct. If we put on one side the less successful works, those wrung from the muse with difficulty, and concentrate on the masterpieces among them, comparing their musical merit with that of his best operas, symphonies etc, they come into the first rank, along with *Faust*, *Jessonda*, and the 3rd, 4th and 5th symphonies. I would even go further and maintain — daringly, since we do not know the complete Spohr oeuvre — that they contain certain features whose equal would be hard to find among his other works, such as their abandonment of the familiar, narrow confines such as happens in for example some of the double quartets, their excursions into realms of vast horizons and deep significance, as in the first and last movements of op. 29 no 1, and an irresistible flow of a fiery, noble temperament such as irradiates the opening movements of op. 74 no. 1 and op. 84 no. 1. Here the master grows in depth and grandeur of expression, and in spiritual and intellectual range, reaching spheres inhabited by such as Beethoven. And then, what a rich array of wonderful slow movements slumber in these works now gathering dust on library shelves, and what captivatingly lively humour, laughing and crying at the same time, bubbles through many a scherzo and rondo!

The quartets, then, earn a high rank amongst Spohr's oeuvre, and they therefore also deserve an honourable place in the history of chamber music next to Schubert, Schumann and Mendelssohn. Spohr did not, it is true, develop the quartet form any further than Beethoven had done, and cannot in general be compared to him for depth and weight; but his quartets have been done a great injustice when classed as ephemeral. The best of them, especially when they do not present any stylistic irritations, undoubtedly deserve to be counted among the most important contributions to the chamber music repertoire; seen purely musically, they present an exceptionally valuable contribution to early Romanticism. It is therefore time for these underrated works to be freed from their heavy burden of prejudice and ignorance and allowed to delight the musical world afresh. And Spohr must also be given the credit for having invented the genre of the double quartet, an attractive art form which one is reluctant to believe totally defunct.

The extent to which Spohr was influenced by his predecessors in the realm of chamber music has already been demonstrated in individual cases. Here some remarks concerning Mozart and Beethoven may, however, be added. Mozart, whose pupil he liked to call himself, was his chief model in quartet composition. An anecdote told by Wasielewski (*Südd. Musikztg* IX, no. 4, 5) illustrates this fact better than other words could: "Spohr was once approached by a keen amateur for advice concerning composition. Instead of embarking on a detailed reply, he fetched the score of a Mozart string quartet and said, 'Everything I have learned, and all I am able to do, comes out of here.'" Recently further evidence has been provided by Richard Wagner (*Mein Leben*, p. 399), who describes his encounter with the Cassel master in 1846: "A tall, stately man of refined demeanour and serious, calm temperament, who stated that the focus of his whole musical education and the cause of his antipathy to modern music lay in the fact that in earliest youth he had been decisively and permanently marked by Mozart's *Magic Flute*, which was then as modern as it was possible to be." It is thus not surprising if Mozartisms abound in Spohr's earlier quartets, often as direct reminiscences. Indirect allusions to Mozart continue to be present even in his later works.

After Mozart's quartets, Spohr's favourites were, he tells us, the six early quartets of Beethoven. But the influence of Beethoven was much less strong, and the younger composer responded only sparingly and cautiously the innovative stimuli that Beethoven's works gave him. His negative attitude to Beethoven's late works, and even to those of his middle period, is well enough documented. In the fifth symphony, he said in his autobiography, he found a regrettable lack of unity and dignity. He was often inclined to formulate his judgments rather more trenchantly, as is shown by a remark in an unpublished diary of the journey in 1815 on the occasion of a performance of this symphony in Munich: "Once again the audience found Beethoven's fifth symphony tiresome." He crossed this sentence out, revealing his inward struggle between admiration and distaste for the man whose greatness he had to acknowledge: perhaps he instinctively sensed that

Beethoven was like the sun, whose power dims the light of the stars, and that the mighty breath of his spirit would extinguish many smaller lights including Spohr's own.

An assessment of the influence that other earlier or contemporary quartet composers may have had on Spohr is greatly assisted by the list of the quartets in Spohr's musical library contained in the catalogue of 1860 already mentioned. He possessed quartets by the following composers (the number of quartets by each is indicated in brackets): Mozart (5), Cherubini (2), Krommer (9), Danzi (3), Rode (4), Romberg (25 — his complete quartet output), Fesca (3), Mayseder (1), Fr. Schneider (1), Speier (2), Mendelssohn (4). Quintets included in his catalogue were by: Mozart (2, in F major (*sic!*) and G minor), Onslow (12), Mendelssohn op. 18 (in A).

Spohr had very little direct influence on the subsequent development of the quartet style, as his own were completely displaced by those of Mendelssohn and Schumann in addition to the classics. Thus the trends that propel his chamber works towards the future are scarcely perceptible at a superficial glance. But they do exist; many harmonic peculiarities found in the works of later composers would be unthinkable without him. So Spohr has the importance of a link between the classics and the middle period of Romanticism too important to be overlooked.

In view of the great merits of Spohr's best creations in this field, a revival of interest is highly desirable, and the question arises as to which works should be chosen to start it. In my opinion two criteria must be kept in mind in addition to objective considerations of quality: firstly, those compositions which deviate too much from the norm must be excluded; and secondly, the aim must be to shatter the almost ineradicable prejudice against him that he was capable of writing gentle, elegiac music and nothing else. If these principles were followed, one would be justified in anticipating a rapid and fundamental reappraisal of this master. For these reasons the quartets from his early period with their fresh, powerful atmosphere are particularly well suited to a revival; first and foremost op. 29 no. 1, then no. 3 of the same set, the quartets op. 15 and the G major quintet. From his Frankfurt and Cassel period the most suitable would be the quartets op. 58 no 1 and op. 74 no. 3, together with the first double quartet, then op. 45 nos. 1 and 2, op. 74 nos. 1 and 2, op. 82 no. 2, op. 84 nos 1 and 2, the B minor quintet and the two last double quartets. Because of their similarity of form the programme of the concert would have to be limited to one Spohr work at a time. An essential prerequisite for achieving the desired effect is that the tempo must not be too dragging — a danger to which the music's character lends itself all too easily. Spohr often complained (II 396) that performances of his works were spoilt by tempos that were too slow. If performed as the first item on the programme — before Beethoven — and played by top-quality performers who had familiarised themselves thoroughly with Spohr's style, one or other of his best chamber works would often have more to say to us than many an over-performed and over-familiar work by one of the earlier composers or many a questionable product of recent times.

The intended aim of the present treatise is not only to improve knowledge about an extensive branch of Spohr's activity, but also to revive interest in an important artist whose descent into oblivion is not deserved. Perhaps success in overturning the current prejudice against him will fall to one of his best chamber works. His vocal works suffer from a generally admitted lack of singability; the oratorios, despite wonderful moments here and there, are excluded by their considerable monotony from being counted among his best achievements, and their neglect is probably justified. His operas do possess considerable historical interest, notably because of the many features that link them to Wagner (particularly relevant here is *Die Kreuzfahrer*), but their weakness, quite apart from their dreadful libretti, is their lack of dramatic tension: they have no 'dramatic blood'. In my opinion, therefore, those of our great societies and institutions whose duty it surely is to care for and protect the best of our German artistic heritage should turn their attention first and foremost to Spohr's instrumental compositions. Among his symphonies the most worthy of performance are the fourth (*Die Weihe der Töne*) as being one of the earliest 'programme' symphonies, and above all the fifth; if they are rehearsed carefully and with an affectionate understanding, they cannot fail to make their effect even today. But if this great master's compositions are to be made to blossom again in the future, the most promising place to start is surely his chamber works, for their basic framework cannot age in the same way that instrumentation does in symphonies, an aspect in which Spohr was not particularly gifted with

intuition. So his best quartets and double quartets are the most suitable ground on which to educate posterity into a lively admiration for a man of whom Wagner later said by way of obituary: "I am sorrowfully aware that we have now lost the last of those noble, dedicated composers whose youth was directly illumined by the radiant sun of Mozart, those who guarded with touching devotion the light they had received from him, just as the vestal virgins tended the sacred flame entrusted to their care and protected it from storms and winds in their quiet hearth. This devoted task kept humanity pure and noble, and if I seek to characterise in a word what spoke out of Spohr and made such an inextinguishable impression on me, then I would put it like this: he was a scrupulous, honourable master of his art; the central tenet of his life was belief in his art, and his deepest inspirations sprang from the strength given by this article of faith. Honour be to Spohr's name! May his memory be revered and his admirable example cherished!"<sup>4</sup>