

# THE MANY CLARINETTISTS WHOM SPOHR KNEW

by Pamela Weston

**T**HOUGH Simon Hermstedt (1778-1846) must take pride of place among clarinetists who influenced Spohr, there was a very large number of others who touched upon the composer's life. This article enumerates some 50 of them. The large number is hardly surprising when one considers that Spohr wrote more solo works for the instrument than any other major composer, more even than Weber. Weber wrote six, five of them for his friend Heinrich Baermann. Spohr wrote ten, nine for Hermstedt. Spohr's use of the clarinet in chamber music and scoring for it in orchestral works is superb and it seems that, just as he himself played the king of stringed instruments, he regarded the clarinet as king of the woodwinds.

1805 could be called Spohr's catalytic year as far as the clarinet is concerned. In it he met several players later connected with Weber and may have derived his initial interest in the clarinet from them. During leave of absence from his Brunswick employment for a concert tour Spohr spent the months of January and February in Dresden. Here he was befriended by the Roth brothers who helped organise concerts for him. Traugott and Gottlieb Roth were, in 1794, the first clarinetists to be appointed to the Dresden court. Both enjoyed long, distinguished careers there and became close friends of Weber when he was their Kapellmeister. Spohr returned to Brunswick and then spent the summer months in the retinue of Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, during army manoeuvres at Magdeburg. The Prince's clarinetist was none other than Baermann. Spohr and Baermann, born within two months of each other and now aged 21, would have taken part in the regular evening music parties and performed the Prince's own compositions, whose clarinet parts had been fashioned for Baermann.

Brunswick's principal clarinet at this time was Tretbach (sometimes referred to as Tretbar); the other clarinetists were two brothers by the name of Spiess, who performed double concertos on occasion. Spohr wrote for Tretbach a concert-piece entitled "Recit. & Adagio", later published as the second movement of his Sixth Violin Concerto, op.28. The clarinet version was performed at Hildburghausen in 1821 by C. Mahr, a pupil of Hermstedt. Spohr was particularly fond of this piece and, even before it landed up in the Sixth Violin Concerto, performed it as middle movement to the as yet uncompleted Tenth Concerto. When he played the Sixth Concerto at Leipzig in 1812 this movement was singled out for special praise by the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* who called it "the very finest that was ever produced by any virtuoso." Whether the 1834 Leipzig performance of "an Adagio by Spohr" by Ferdinand Heinze, principal clarinetist in the Gewandhaus Orchestra, was the work in question is not known. However, such did the popularity of Spohr's works increase among clarinetists that in the 1850s Carel Julius Becht, principal in the court orchestra at the Hague, actually played one of the violin concertos on the clarinet. Ferdinand Tretbar, in 1828 to take over the Brunswick post from Tretbach (thought to be his father), was a keen advocate of Spohr's music and played both the first two concertos.

When Spohr moved to Gotha as Konzertmeister he found, as director of the Duke's wind music, the clarinet and basset-horn player Heinrich Backofen. Backofen had many talents – he composed, was also a flautist and harpist – and it was one of his harp pupils, Dorette Scheidler, whom Spohr married the following year. Spohr's seven years at Gotha resulted in the composition of five significant clarinet works: the Concertos ops.26 and 57, Variations on a Theme from the opera *Alruna*, "Ich bin allein" from the singspiel *Der Zweikampf mit der Geliebten*, Potpourri on Themes by Peter von Winter op.80. All these were written for and premiered by Hermstedt.

The special friendship between Spohr and Hermstedt was influenced by two significant things: their affinity for the violin and love for Mozart. Hermstedt, in his early years, had played the violin and there is no doubt that this instrument's capabilities helped him rise to the technical challenges put before him by Spohr. The composer is on record for telling the famous clarinetist Franz Tausch that Hermstedt's clarinet style was based on that of the violinist Kreutzer. Spohr's idealism of Mozart is well known. When Hermstedt, in 1805, went for a short period of study in Berlin with Tausch it was Mozart's recently published Clarinet Concerto K622 that he took with him. In years to come, Spohr and Hermstedt performed Mozart's Clarinet Quintet K581 together many times. It was indeed the work that featured most in

Hermstedt's final two years of concertising – 1840 and 1841.

Hermstedt's employer, Duke Günther Friedrich Karl I of Sondershausen, brought the two men together when he commissioned a concerto for him from Spohr in 1808. The Duke, a keen clarinettist himself, was dedicatee of Spohr's Notturmo op.34 (1815) and Andreas Romberg's Clarinet Quintet op.57 (1818). In 1837 his daughter-in-law, Princess Mathilde, commissioned Spohr's Six German Songs op.103. The premiere of the First Clarinet Concerto was given by Hermstedt on 16th June 1809 at Sondershausen. Earlier in the year, at the end of January when Spohr delivered the concerto to Sondershausen, he appeared in a concert with Hermstedt, leading the orchestra and premiered his Sixth Violin Concerto, only just completed. No doubt the origin of the violin concerto's middle movement was discussed between the friends. The Finnish clarinettist, Bernhard Crusell, bought both the first two concertos almost as soon as they came off the press in Leipzig. He was a good linguist, translated a number of opera texts for the Swedish stage, and these included Spohr's *Zemire und Azor* in 1828.

When Spohr moved his family to Vienna in May 1813 to take up the post of orchestral director at the Theater an der Wien he was given a free hand in choosing the players. For his first clarinet he had no need to look further than the incumbent, Joseph Friedlowsky, a fine player who had held the post since 1802. Friedlowsky's second was none other than Antonius Stadler, son to Mozart's clarinettist. It was Friedlowsky who provided the inspiration for Spohr's clarinet parts in the Nonet op.31 (1813) and Octet op.32 (1814). Hermstedt came to Vienna in the winter of 1814-15 for performances which included the premiere of Spohr's *Fantasia and Variations on a Theme of Danzi* op.81. Spohr, Hermstedt and Friedlowsky all belonged to the coterie that surrounded Beethoven at that time. Beethoven had a free seat at the Theater an der Wien and ample opportunity to witness Friedlowsky playing, even if by now he was unable to hear the full beauty of his tone. He consulted Friedlowsky constantly over the writing of orchestral parts for the clarinet.

In September 1816, during his Italian travels, Spohr had a brief encounter with Benedetto Carulli, later to be principal at La Scala, and heard him at Milan's Conservatoire in a student performance of a wind sextet by Agostino Belloli. Early in November the following year, Spohr was at the Hague and met for the first time David de Groot, then principal clarinet at the French Theatre. Spohr was much impressed by this artist and later invited him to play in his orchestras at Frankfurt and Kassel. Besides the invited de Groot, Spohr had, during his two-year term as opera director at Frankfurt, another excellent clarinettist in Georg Reinhardt. Reinhardt, at Frankfurt from 1814 to 1821, held other posts at Wiesbaden, Darmstadt and Stuttgart and seems to have made a speciality of concertos for two clarinets. Spohr encouraged this, giving Reinhardt and de Groot several opportunities to perform together as soloists.

On two occasions in London during 1820 Spohr performed his Nonet op.31 with Thomas Lindsay Willman, England's "Idol of the Public". This artist made such an impression on the composer that, according to George Hogarth writing in *The Musical World*, "he devoutly wished he had studied the clarinet in preference to the violin". Yet another famous clarinettist met Spohr through playing the Nonet with him. This time, in December 1820, it was Jacques Jules Boufil, principal in Paris's Opéra Comique. When Boufil, with Moscheles on piano and members of the Reicha Wind Quintet, gave the first performance of Spohr's Quintet op.52 in January, the composer expressed himself very pleased with the clarinettist's playing. The Quintet had another airing in December that year at Leipzig; the clarinettist this time being Wilhelm Barth of the Gewandhaus Orchestra. Barth's playing would also have pleased Spohr, for he was reported to have modelled himself on Hermstedt.

Clearly, when Spohr arrived at Kassel in 1822 to take up his final appointment as Kapellmeister there, he was dissatisfied with the clarinettist incumbents – André and Ruprecht – and by the following year had secured the services of his former friends – Conrad Bänder and David de Groot. The list of known clarinettists on the pay-roll during Spohr's 35-year tenure is quite formidable and includes, besides the four mentioned above, the following listed chronologically by employment: Deichert, Neff, Heisterhagen, Vauth, F. Bänder (Conrad's son), Griesel, Lesser, Schultheis, Bättenhausen, Curth, Holzapfel, Bührmann and Hamburger.

Conrad Bänder, his brother Ludwig, and David de Groot were all pupils of Iwan Müller, inventor of the "simple system" clarinet. The brothers earned a considerable reputation touring Europe between the years 1816 and 1822. While in Paris during the early months of 1819 they had commissioned from Reicha

a Grand Duo Concertant. In May that year they were in Frankfurt and Conrad performed a concerto by Müller for the Museum Concerts. This was probably when Spohr first met Bänder. In 1821 and 1822 the brothers were in Russia and it appears that Ludwig then settled in St. Petersburg. Conrad began his engagement as principal clarinet at Kassel early in 1823. Already he had won applause in concertos by Spohr and Krommer when, to his astonishment, de Groot arrived and took over his position. The inhabitants were enraged at the insult to Bänder and complained in print. This had no effect at all but, after de Groot left in 1826, Bänder resumed his rightful position and held it until he retired 20 years later. Under Spohr's baton he had the chance to play very many solo dates.

The mix-up over de Groot could have been because Spohr contracted with him before meeting Bänder and this was exacerbated by doubts as to whether de Groot could obtain release from his appointment at the Hague. De Groot certainly had an unsettled career; twice he broke the Hague appointment, enticed away by Spohr, and twice the inhabitants begged him not to keep leaving them. Leave them he finally did in 1830 and took on a series of conducting appointments at Strasbourg, Marseilles and Nice. While at Kassel he had on occasion deputised for Spohr. In 1837 he conducted the first performance in his own country of *Faust* at the French Theatre in the Hague.

In 1825 Franz Schalk, that "disgrace to the breed of basset-horn players", performed at Kassel and Spohr went to hear him. For years this man had bounced around Europe and to Russia giving concerts which, through platform antics and the music he chose, provoked much amusement. Sir George Smart, who met Schalk first at Spohr's house on 3rd November, went to his performance the following day and commented later that Spohr "disapproved altogether of the concert, Schalk, he said, being a quack."

At the Halberstadt Festival of June 1827 Spohr, in an unusual role as viola player, performed Mozart's Trio K498 with Friedrich Müller on clarinet and Friedrich Schneider, the festival's director, on piano. Müller had known Spohr for a number of years. He had been a pupil of Traugott Roth at Dresden and from 1803 to 1854 was Rudolstadt's court clarinetist.

The Six German Songs op.103, written between October and December 1837 on a commission from Princess Mathilde of Sondershausen, brought Spohr into contact with yet more clarinetists. They were tried out in June 1838 when Louis and his second wife Marianne were in Karlsbad for a few days recovering from the death of his daughter Therese. Marianne played the piano part, Gottfried Wilhelm Seeman the clarinet, and the soprano was Ottilie Schubert. Seeman, a fine player, was principal in the Hanover court orchestra from 1818 to 1850.

The first known performance of the Songs was in January 1839, given by the clarinetist F. Mehner and soprano Mlle. Kratk at the Frankfurt Museum Society Concerts. In March that same year Gustav Heinze, then only 18, performed "Zwiegesang" (No.2) at Leipzig with Henrietta Büнау and Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn wrote to Spohr thanking him "with all my heart" for such a beautiful song. Heinze had already met Spohr at Kassel in 1838 during a concert tour; by 1839 he was playing second to his father Ferdinand in the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

When Liszt gave a concert at Kassel in November 1841 he included two of the Songs. Conrad Bänder played clarinet and the voice part was taken by the court tenor, Johann Derska. Substitution of tenor for soprano is not unusual, provided the words are suitable; F. Mehner, for instance, performed Schubert's "Der Hirt auf dem Felsen" with the tenor Caspari at Frankfurt in 1848.

Ever a protagonist of the clarinet, Spohr gave players in his orchestras ample opportunity to play as soloists. The Symphonie Concertante op.2 for four clarinets and orchestra by Ludwig Schindelmeisser (himself a clarinetist) was even performed twice at Kassel. The first time, in 1839, the players were Lesser (1st), Schultheis (2nd), Vauth (3rd) and Heisterhagen (4th); the second, in 1841, it was Bättenhausen (1st), Curth (2nd), Wenderoth (3rd) and Kollman (4th). The last two players do not appear to have been regular members of the orchestra and were probably "got in" for the performance. Lesser, Heisterhagen, Bättenhausen and Curth seem to have been killed off by the Schindelmeisser for their names, previously on the pay-roll, do not appear again! Schultheis and Vauth survived, remaining at Kassel until 1866 and 1850 respectively.

While on a visit to Oldenburg in June 1845 Spohr heard the court chamber musician Köhn perform the First Clarinet Concerto and, according to the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, "not only the audience

but Spohr himself" were delighted. In an unusual recital at Kassel on 11th October 1848 Johann Hentschel, a talented blind clarinettist from Karlsruhe, included two of the composer's op.103 Songs. Hermstedt performed just two of the Songs for his very last public concert in 1841.

The aria "Ich bin allein" had long been a favourite recital item for Hermstedt. When Spohr came to London in 1852 to conduct an extended version of *Faust* for the Royal Italian Opera he included the aria expressly for the soprano Jeanne Castellan. The obligato on this occasion would undoubtedly have been played by the great Victorian clarinettist, Henry Lazarus<sup>1</sup>. Autumn 1853 saw the composition of Spohr's last chamber work to include the clarinet: the Septet op. 147. Both Spohr and his loyal principal clarinettist died at Kassel in 1859 – Bänder on 12th February and Spohr on 22nd October.

#### Note

1. This was not the first time that Spohr had inserted this aria into *Faust*. The first occasion was at Frankfurt on 11th June 1818 when the soprano Therese Grünbaum made a guest appearance. Georg Reinhardt was on clarinet. "Ich bin allein" was also included in performances of the opera in Berlin on 14th and 17th November 1829 though Spohr was not directly involved in this production.

#### Bibliographical footnote

More information on the great majority of the clarinettists mentioned in this article can be found in two of Pamela Weston's books, available at a special 20 per cent discount to members of the Spohr Society of Great Britain from the publishers, Fentone Music Ltd.; Fleming Road; Corby; Northants. NN17 4SN. They are *Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past* and *More Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past* (both £15.60p) while Pamela Weston's third book in the series, *Clarinet Virtuosi of Today* (£17.20p), may also be of interest. Please include additional postage at £1.50p per book.