

LIFE WITH LOUIS: PART TWO

Thoughts on recording the clarinet works of Louis Spohr

by John Denman

This is the final part of John Denman's views on the preparation and recording of all Spohr's works for clarinet and orchestra. In the 1995 Spohr Journal he dealt with the first of his CDs released by Carlton Classics and here are his comments on the second one. Discographical details are appended as a footnote.

Fantasia and Variations on a theme of Danzi, Op.81

HAVING played this work many times with piano or string quartet, I had assumed that these versions were the only two, although I had heard one soloist play the piece with string quartet plus double bass. This was one of Maurice Powell's tapes taken from a German radio broadcast. To my surprise, the celebrated clarinet soloist David Glazer came to Tucson on holiday from New York in the winter of 1995. He found me at home and we spent several happy hours discussing music, especially Spohr's clarinet music.

David is now retired but some 30 years ago, performed Op.81 with a full orchestra in Frankfurt for broadcast by a German radio station. At first I thought he was mixed up over the opus numbers, just as it seems Spohr was in his Autobiography, but no. David had found the orchestral parts in a library in Marburg and had compiled a score from the parts. "Did he still have them?" Yes! "Could I copy them?" Again, yes!

A month later the package arrived along with a cassette tape of his performance (some really fine clarinet playing). As I opened the parcel, my mind was telling me "this is sure to be musty old handwritten manuscript" but I was wrong! The parts turned out to be a Schmidt publication, the string parts identical to the Schlesinger string quartet version and, of course, the double bass part that I had heard before was merely the orchestral bass part. I phoned Keith Warsop who had already been helpful in obtaining the original Schlesinger edition of the clarinet part from the BBC Music Library. Keith seemed to think the orchestral recording a good idea, for he reminded me that when Hermstedt had given the first performance, he had also played "Parto, parto" with an orchestra and he possibly could have also played Op.81 with orchestra.

Whether or not the string quartet version came from the full score we may never know or if the full score was made using the string quartet as a framework. It could have been that all three versions existed just for the sake of convenience or forces available at various times. I have to say that the RPO handled it very well, but I heard a lot of individual practice going on during tea breaks!

Concerto No.1 in C minor, Op.26

I found this concerto in manuscript together with No.2 at the Royal Academy of Music library. It is note for note the same as the published score; only a few minute details of articulation are different. I enjoy this piece, especially the delightful slow movement. In the first movement Spohr's love of Mozart's music is obvious. The plan or form is similar; only the coda is a surprise with its soft ending. I tried to sound like Heifetz in the brilliant passages for I got the idea that Spohr himself would have had that sort of command of the instrument and that kind of dash or forward motion, without uncontrolled plain old rushing. Many years ago this "speeding up" or forward motion was part of a rubato style that is not done today. For other more lyrical sections of the first movement, I wanted to sing through my clarinet and not disturb too much the general mood and tempo, thus retaining the idea that we had not "changed to another piece of music" or wallowed just because the music itself is slower. I kept it simple and as honest as I could.

The short classical-style slow movement is a gem and in many places in this movement we hear this time the influence of Mozart's harmonic ploys. Near the end, perhaps the most obvious would be the little coda; set up each time by interrupted cadences (in America they are called deceptive cadences and I like this way of putting it). Before this, however, the clarinet melody is harmonised in true Mozartian fashion eg, the very first bar is plain enough, A \flat major for two beats then B \flat minor leading back to A \flat major again. At Letter B the melody remains unchanged but the harmony now reads in quavers or eighth notes, A \flat dominant of F minor, then F minor, E \flat diminished to B \flat minor, then on to A \flat minor second inversion, then on the fourth bar of Letter B, a real Mozartian suspension. What does this mean to a clarinet soloist? What can he

or she do? For we do not have that flexible luxury that string players have, ie, to be passionate or reflective by varying the tone, pitch or vibrato. What I do is, hopefully, what Jack Brymer taught me to do. Simple – coo! Or at least vary the dynamic level to go to or away from a cadence, just to show that something is happening in the harmony.

Rondos are usually fun to play and listen to, especially Mozart rondos. This one is also, though it is a little dated at times and smacks rather of the wind band. But it has moments of sheer virtuosity that makes it one of those rondos that demand attention. The surprise is the ending, which fades away. Am I ahead of myself in time when I ask: As the music fades away, a fragment of the opening theme from the first movement is right there in the violins. Did Spohr recycle these notes or did they just happen?

Concerto No. 2 in E \flat major, Op.57

This work was composed for the first music festival in all Germany, held in 1810 in Frankenhausen. As you might expect, there are fanfares and drums and for once Spohr writes in a major key. The original orchestra of 110 must have sounded very loud and festive, the solo part very difficult and brilliant. Even so, if one looks beyond the solo part, it is plain to see that Spohr had further developed the art of having the solo line decorate the thematic material and then, finally emerge in a complete solo role with pure orchestral accompaniment. When playing the first movement, this kind of composer's ploy needs to be thoroughly studied and executed carefully so that the solo part emerges at just the right moment.

The lovely singing theme about halfway through the movement gives the clarinettist a chance to sing and phrase. Again, there is a temptation to wallow and over-indulge in overstatement. It is very hard to strike a balance between overstating or understating. Any excess results in rather bad taste, I think. The climax of the first movement is surely the triplet scale up to altissimo C (for the clarinet, high B \flat concert). As seems typical of Spohr, these high notes come at a time when the soloist is utterly exhausted. Although he was considerate in many ways, we must remember that Hermstedt had the capacity for doing just that – playing long passagework stretches without breathing, a fast staccato and a propensity for playing in the high register. Not many players are so lucky or have taken the trouble to achieve this.

This input-output technique on the clarinet is, I think, akin to Olympian feats; it comes with assiduous practice and requires nerves of steel and a determination to say who will win, the player or the clarinet. Steve Trier used to say: "Why is the clarinet like a dog? Because it smells fear." In these concertos, only positive thought and confidence will carry a soloist through. My own top note practice has been to take a Bach prelude or something like that and practise it in the altissimo register softly. It is hard on the lip but regular practice builds up strength in the facial muscles.

The slow movement begins in the chalumeau register, a distinct release from what has gone before. I notice that the theme starts with the same notes as those in the slow movement of Concerto No.1 but an octave lower. There follows some very attractive interplay between woodwind soloists which gives way to a very dramatic middle section, giving the soloist a completely different role, reminding us of the Brahms Quintet, written many years later. Then, surprise – binary form and an extension of the slow movement. The end of the movement gives us a last chance to savour that lovely low register for which the clarinet is so renowned, the silky, smooth tones of the chalumeau.

Sir Henry Wood's formula for a successful concert was "Wake 'em up, put 'em to sleep, wake 'em up again." True to form, the last movement begins with a timpani solo, fanfares and a jaunty 3/4 polacca which incorporates some of Spohr's most fiendish clarinet writing. While this movement is in rondo form, the C section going into the relative minor explores all facets of Hermstedt's phenomenal technique.

I think it was Dan Leeson, one of the editors of the New Mozart Edition, who wrote: "To play the clarinet you need the grace of a ballerina, the touch of a neurosurgeon and the hide of a rhinoceros." The C section is where you need all these things in the space of some 30 measures or so, the whole lot culminating in what has to be the repertoire's hardest top C. As if the C were guaranteed, Spohr gives the music after this the most joyful exclamation of trills, modulations and attractive rhythms, almost as if jumping for joy at having performed the impossible feat.

In this last movement we are treated to many modulations, leaps into other keys, all enharmonic, no key signatures, but rather teasing, humorous jumps that make the listener sit up and wonder "where are we?" For this sort of thing, Spohr was highly criticised by music critics of that day and even in our own time. The

label “chromatic harmony” has been applied to Spohr’s music, quite unjustly I think, for no “chromatic harmony” exists. His ideas of jumping into other keys, surprises that really show a composer thinking ahead and forging what will be, were taken up in the future by Liszt and Wagner, who did actually use some chromatic harmonic passagework; this pioneer work of Spohr has gone unnoticed save for a few scholars.

Above all, I have enjoyed Spohr’s orchestration; his masterly writing of counterpoint is evident in all the works that I know and I confess they are few! Of course, his string writing is wonderful but those ideas for winds – Mozartian, you could say and not be wrong. Beethoven slow movements? Maybe, but when it really comes down to analysis it sounds like Spohr, not really Mozart or Beethoven but Spohr. Then, the brass writing in Violin Concerto No.9! What a piece, the solo so formidable, the ideas of tutti orchestration with full brass sound so thrilling to hear and fresh as fresh can be, a development in orchestral writing that has only one identity, flowing from the pen of the once forgotten master.

I’m so pleased I found all the clarinet works. It has long been my ambition to record them all. I listen and sometimes wish I could do some bits and pieces over again but at least I have played all of them, all over the world, even as far away as China, with their Central Philharmonic. People love the music. Many musicians in the RPO had never heard Spohr before and remarked on the “wonderful musical content” of these works.

Now all is a little empty. Gone the thrill of the hunt for material, the editing and production of parts and scores and the excitement of endless hours of practice followed by the joy of hearing a symphony orchestra play the notes. It was a wonderful feeling, shared to by Bob Bernhardt, the conductor on these CDs. My wife, Paula Fan, who produced the CDs and knows Spohr’s music very well, has nicknamed me the Spohr Bore! Since her interest has been in Dussek, I call her the Dussek Drone. How lucky we are to be always dealing with such beautiful things! Now I have to turn to something else to play and record, although I have no doubt I’ll still be performing Spohr’s works until that day when I put my clarinet down for the last time, hopefully, not too soon.

Discographical footnote

Carlton Classics 303660082. Concerto No.3 in F minor, WoO.19; *Alruna* Variations in B♭ major, WoO.15; Concerto No.4 in E minor, WoO.20; Potpourri in F major on themes from Winter’s *Das Unterbrochene Opferfest*, Op.80. John Denman (clarinet); Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Robert Bernhardt. Recorded at Watford Town Hall, December 22nd-23rd, 1994. Released 1996.

Carlton Classics 3036600552. Fantasy and Variations in B♭ minor on a theme of Danzi, Op.81; Concerto No.1 in C minor, Op.26; Concerto No.2 in E♭ major, Op.57; Weber: Concertino in E♭ major, Op.26. John Denman (clarinet); Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Robert Bernhardt. Recorded at Watford Town Hall, August 21st, 1996. Released 1997.