

A NEW VIEW OF SPOHR'S VIOLIN CONCERTOS

Review by Keith Warsop

THE 176-page study by Jonathan A. Sturm, "The Evolution of a Dramatic Compositional Style in the Violin Concertos of Louis Spohr" (diss. Indiana University, March 1995) is a major contribution to the literature on the composer, offering fascinating new insights into his violin concertos, their influences, the way they are put together and their development.

Simply put, the author's theme is that Spohr imported into his concertos devices from the operas he adored, mainly Mozart and Cherubini; that this development reached an important staging post with the recitative and aria slow movement of the Sixth Concerto and went on to achieve its climax in the Eighth (*Gesangszene*) before tailing off. Dr. Sturm offers an ingenious reason for this. He suggests that, in the very year of 1816 in which the Eighth was composed, Spohr's *Faust* was produced for the first time and launched him on to a spell of operatic successes which also included *Zemire und Azor* and *Jessonda*. This intense involvement in opera (and later oratorio) meant that "from the Ninth Concerto on, therefore, Spohr had less need or interest in using the violin concerto as a medium through which to build a successful dramatic style."

Dr. Sturm defines the dramatic style in Spohr's concertos as follows: "Dramatic style applies to those characteristics of Spohr's violin concertos that may derive from the operatic fashions or traditions of his time period. The style may come from Spohr's exposure to previous efforts in operatic composition, or from the operatic performance practices that were popular during his life and with which he was familiar. In his violin concertos, Spohr's dramatic style develops as he combines discrete musical techniques and fuses them to create a sense of fluid spontaneity. Continuing through the Eighth Concerto, his music increasingly blends moments of reflective musing with declamatory passages and cadenzas. The stylistic elements that contribute to this mood include:

- musical passages written in an overt recitative style
- written out accompanied cadenzas
- chromatic harmonies, in the manner of Handelian or Mozartian recitative
- melodic embellishment, in the style of spontaneous vocal ornamentation found in arias and cadenzas of the time
- frequent modulation, also a characteristic of operatic recitative
- fluid rhythms, tonic evasion and the blurring of formal boundaries, all of which contribute to a sense of improvisation and spontaneity

"One significant attribute to these styles is that Spohr uses them in important thematic areas. There is, therefore, a difference between Spohr's use of a dramatic style in thematic areas and the typically French use of virtuoso passagework of a non-melodic variety in non-thematic sections of a concerto. Many of the early nineteenth-century violinist-composers wrote extended passages of non-melodic technique, including arpeggios, diatonic and chromatic scales, and repeated rhythmic figures, all occurring over a predictable, diatonic harmonic rhythm. Yet in the thematic sections of these concertos one finds recognizable melodies in four-bar units, most often in dotted rhythms. Thus Spohr's fully developed dramatic style is more than mere technical wizardry; it consists of more than simple cadenzas and melodic trills and turns. At its peak, this dramatic style permeates entire movements, imbuing principal themes with what Spohr's contemporaries described as a yearning chromaticism, dreamy melancholy, and recitative."

The mention of written out accompanied cadenzas in this context might seem baffling in view of the fact that only concertos Five and Eight actually contain such cadenzas but Dr. Sturm puts forward an original and convincing explanation for their apparent lack in the other concertos. He considers that Spohr used brief links in accompanied cadenza style throughout the first movements, thus integrating the cadenza into the general structure rather than leaving it as a halting point for a display of straight virtuosity. An early example is given as occurring in the opening movement of the Second Concerto, bars 177-185, in which "a

seven-measure bridge with characteristics of a brief accompanied cadenza links the B-minor figuration from the second solo later in the movement to the recapitulation of the B theme in D major. This cadenza is not on the scale of Viotti's accompanied cadenzas that might consist of 50-70 measures. Rather, it is a connecting passage in a quasi-improvised style." A further development of this device is seen in the Fourth, bars 89-90. "Though this passage is not a formal cadenza, the forward rhythmic motion of the movement's thematic and figural sections becomes suspended for its duration, lending it the quality of a brief cadenza. This passage lasts only three measures, yet it foreshadows what would become an increasing tendency to write passages for the violin in a style that suspends the usual forward drive of a movement's tempo."

This integration of the cadenza into the structure of the first movement rather than wedged in near its conclusion reaches its peak in the Twelfth Concerto in which it expands to fill the complete movement: "Here Spohr approached the cadenza in a similar manner to the way he had approached the recitative in his Eighth Concerto: he elevated it to the stature of an entire first movement. Spohr's approach to the cadenza, however, is not along the lines of the instrumental cadenza found at the conclusion of a movement. He follows vocal cadenza models, which ensures that a certain degree of recitative style remains in the Twelfth Concerto's first movement. The solo cadenzas all end with a recitative cadence. The solo concludes on the dominant, followed by two chords in the tutti that complete the authentic cadence, and between cadences the legato solo passages give a coloratura quality to the movement..

"Since the cadenzas are given a slow chordal accompaniment throughout the movement, it is possible to say that in this concerto the accompanied cadenza pioneered by Viotti thirty to forty years earlier as a segment of a finale had now grown into a complete first movement. It is probably the only such movement in the repertoire."

The Twelfth is here viewed as a partial return to the dramatic interests which reached a pinnacle in the Eighth where "Spohr elevates recitative to become an entire movement." He says: "Spohr had written in a similar vein in the second movement of his Sixth Concerto, which in itself was a stylistic novelty. To alter the external form of a violin concerto and completely reshape it according to operatic models, however, was a step no other composer had taken."

The breadth of Dr. Sturm's coverage is demonstrated in his first chapter "Influences upon the development of Louis Spohr's dramatic style". After listing the stylistic elements noted above, he considers in turn:

- 1) The evolving concerto;
- 2) The influence of opera;
- 3) The influence of the cadenza;
- 4) Chromaticism in Spohr's concertos;
- 5) The influence of modifications to the violin and bow.

Dr. Sturm's general thesis is not simplistic, however. He says: "For Spohr, the use of 'drama' in the concertos never acquired the depth or scope that it could in staged works where motives revealed hidden meaning in an evolving personal drama within the plot. The concertos, as show pieces, applied the development of surface aspects of opera to the violin, including aspects of virtuoso technique, vocal style, and harmonic language, all of which vocalists had been applying to opera over the previous century. Thus Spohr evolved the use of cadenza, recitative (both as style and form), ornamentation of melodic lines (*fioriture*), chromatic harmony, and the short melodic units common to declamatory singing in his pursuit of a dramatic concerto style."

Of particular interest, in view of the variety of design used by Spohr in his various opening movements, is Dr. Sturm's comment on this element: "It is possible to place the structure of many of Spohr's concerto first movements into a modified sonata form, usually with the recapitulation bringing a truncated return of the material from the exposition. Exponents of Spohr's allegiance to the French school fit his concertos into Viotti's molds, and because there is a strong element of the French school influence in Spohr's concertos, these discussions are not in error. It is also possible, however, to place his movements into a large-scale ritornello design, which emphasizes the alternation of tutti and solo, and places the themes into that context.

“The research presented here shows that Spohr did evolve a unique approach to form throughout his concertos, making design modifications in nearly all of them, thus it can become contrived to refer continually to the modified sonata form. The Baroque design of ritornello form, however, allows nearly all of Spohr’s structural experiments to occur without contrivance, and it also lifts the dramatic elements of Spohr’s style into relief rather than covering them with concerns about thematic recapitulation and instrumental style. All of Spohr’s concertos fit comfortably into the ritornello model, and only in Concertos Nos. 12-15 do the tutti sections become so insignificant that they cease to function as sections of a ritornello and become mere points of punctuation.”

One question that arises because of Dr. Sturm’s concentration on the “dramatic style” in Spohr’s concertos is how the Ninth and the Eleventh fit into his argument in view of the fact that he considers this style peaked in the Eighth and then tailed off. After all, Nos. 9 and 11 are judged to be among Spohr’s “master concertos” along with Nos. 7 and 8 so we were curious to see how Dr. Sturm explained their qualities. This is what he says in his introductory remarks about the Ninth: “From the Ninth Concerto on, therefore, Spohr had less need or interest in using the violin concerto as a medium through which to build a successful dramatic style [because of his success with his operas]. He had peaked and moved on. With the exception of the Twelfth Concerto, the remainder of Spohr’s concertos break no new ground in the pursuit of dramatic writing. This is not to say that they are not successful. Several of these later concertos show Spohr handling the French concerto form with a focused maturity rarely seen in his first six concertos. They are refined in their use of melody, harmony, and structure, and they show less of the angular awkwardness of Spohr’s earlier concertos, where the emphasis had been more on experiment than synthesis.

“With the possible exception of the Seventh Concerto, the Ninth Concerto is perhaps the clearest model of a French school first movement since Spohr’s Second Concerto sixteen years earlier. It follows a distinct sonata form, in which the principal themes in both exposition and recapitulation are stated by the orchestra. Virtuoso figurations for the soloist return in the normal manner, initiated by an authentic cadence as opposed to being absorbed into a melody. The mood of the concerto is less one of experiment and novelty than of consolidation of a style within the sphere of classical form.”

However, his treatment of No. 11 is more cursory and slightly disappointing in the light of his attention to detail in the earlier works. He concludes that the Eleventh “is a solid, well-crafted piece that extends the French tradition only in its more chromatic use of harmony and more integrated use of themes.”

This dissertation is devoted in the main to the first movements. The finales are not discussed on the grounds that they “changed little throughout his 40-year career, holding fast to the French rondo design with which he began writing the last movements of his concertos in 1802.” On the other hand, several of the slow movements are examined, especially those to the Sixth, Seventh and Eighth concertos where Spohr’s “dramatic style” is also in evidence.

In conclusion, we congratulate Dr. Sturm on his dedicated work and hope that his dissertation will eventually find a publisher.