

THE INDIVIDUALITY OF SPOHR

by Harold Truscott

THERE is no finer example of the profound difference between creative theory and practice than Louis Spohr, and far too often a knowledge of his theories has been made to do duty for a knowledge of his music. What he could not understand objectively in others has been made the measure of what he could understand unfailingly in his own music.

Spohr professed sincerely a respect and love for classical ideals; he could not understand much of Beethoven's middle and late period work, and said so, perhaps too vehemently. He is not the first composer to fail to understand in others something of what he was prepared to do himself. I am not sure that Spohr ever really understood intellectually just what classical ideals were, if one is to go by his own words on the subject. But he knew instinctively what would do when it came to a question of his own work.

Let me not be misunderstood; Spohr is no Beethoven, although there was a time when he was considered to be the greater composer. He is spasmodically great and a fine and rewarding composer almost all the time – that is, if one considers his instrumental music. I have said that he knew what would do in his own music; he knew also what would not do. Because of his failure to understand Beethoven he has been accused of a lack of self-criticism in his own work which is rather poor reasoning. However, it is a charge of which it is easy to dispose; one instance is sufficient. In 1812 he produced his first oratorio; it was very successful in Vienna and had a number of performances by demand. Spohr, however, was highly dissatisfied with it and eventually withdrew it and suppressed it.

Some of his choral and operatic music justifies certain criticisms which have been made of his work: that it is weak, that he relies too much on a chromaticism which inclines to become mawkish and sentimental. This is not true of his oratorios *The Fall of Babylon* and *The Last Judgment*, or of the opera *Faust*. There is a measure of power here and a mastery of quiet, grave and quite unsentimental beauty which, for me, time has done nothing to dim. But it is true that his finest work is to be found mostly in his large output of instrumental music, and here there are riches enough and to spare. Here there is strength and a direct, healthy, forthright expression with an abundant mixture of real humour. Anyone who has heard his Octet, Op.32, has heard all these qualities operating in a texture beautifully balanced and a structure which never allows any one strand to get out of hand. The humour is mainly concentrated in the pair of bubbling, irrepressible horns, and it is a mark of Spohr's innate classical mastery that these instruments are always subtly under control, although they frequently appear to threaten wreck to the design.

The same control is to be found in the Nonet, Op.31, another work in the divertimento style where, true to type, the interest is centred principally in the wind quintet; as in the Octet, however, its subtlest feature is that the strings, while mainly supporting, are still maintained as true chamber parts. The Nonet, especially, has a slow movement of grave beauty and noble proportions.

In fact, the character of his instrumental music is admirably summed up in the various contemporary accounts of his violin playing, in which all agree that the tone and attack were firm and bold, with finesse but without finickiness, and at the same time pure. In his chamber music, particularly, the kind of chromaticism with which one meets has its roots in the type of structural chromatic tonality of which Schubert was a much greater master. But Spohr, too, had a deep understanding here, and it shows itself in such things as the magical divergence on to B major

harmony in the first movement of the E \flat Double Quartet, Op.77, just as the music is busily preparing for a second subject in C minor. The B major proves to be the tonic 'Neapolitan' sixth of B \flat major, the normal key at this point, but Spohr's masterly use of this chromatic harmony for six bars has made the normal sound much stranger than if he had made use here of something really unusual. This is the kind of constructive use of chromaticism with which one is constantly confronted in the chamber music.

The same movement has a magnificently terse development in which in a few bars the two answering parts of the main theme grow in combination with each other and show consistently changing characters, so that the beginning of the recapitulation comes as a culmination of this growth and the most necessary thing at that moment. This is classical structure as the greatest masters understood it, and in such works Spohr is with them.

I have said that Spohr is no Beethoven; he is something else – he is himself, and that is valuable; also there are composers, of whom he is one, in whom failure to understand others is necessary for their own growth. But it is here that the real weakness of his work is apparent. He is a composer of a time and, in one way, that time is our time rather than his own. He made extravagant claims for some of his work – the *Historical Symphony*, for instance, where the finale was, according to him, the very latest thing and left Beethoven and the others in the previous movements far behind. But, in fact, all this music is pure Spohr, and of a pretty high quality. And this is the point: whatever Spohr wrote, he was Spohr, absolutely unmistakably. Here he is not classical, he is 20th century. It is our own time which has produced the composer with the style so personal that he is recognised in the opening bars – Sibelius, Elgar, Nielsen, Stravinsky, Hindemith, Vaughan Williams, Britten; whatever they write is immediately recognisable. This is a large part, although not all, of their individuality, and in this Spohr is of their company. He is the first modern individual composer. His individuality is of a narrower kind than that of the great classical composers; they had a universality. This is local; nor is this entirely an adverse criticism. But it does explain to some extent why these composers, fine as they are, cannot speak to all men with the same pungency, except in isolated works.

Spohr had a leaning towards surface experiment, as in the Seventh Symphony for two orchestras; this is really a matter of a normal orchestra with a concertante group of 11 solo instruments. But such experiments, with one exception, do nothing to help or hinder his music. The exception is his Fourth Symphony, *The Consecration of Sound*. This, written to a (recited) poem by Carl Pfeiffer, produces a complete departure from the classical symphonic structure which gains immeasurably by being divorced from the poem.

The structural experiment of the *Gesangszene* Violin Concerto, No.8 in A minor, is no more than a large-scale return to the origins of the concerto. Its music, however, is of his best; it is one of the finest works of its kind in the 19th century, which could also be said of at least four others of his 15. In shape it is an extended recitative in which the orchestra hints at the finale; this leads to the aria, a big, spaciouly designed slow movement, followed by the finale, which is really like a large, typical Spohr concerto first movement. A striking feature of this and others of his violin concertos is that the solo writing is prophetically like that of Joachim's two magnificent later concertos in style and content, and these left their impress on Brahms. Not all of Spohr's work is of this order, but there is a sufficient proportion to justify him as a composer a good deal of whose music should be regularly performed.

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