

Two Items on Spohr and Bruckner

SPOHR AS AN INFLUENCE ON BRUCKNER

by Keith Warsop

BEETHOVEN, Schubert and Wagner are frequently cited in the literature on Bruckner when composers who influenced him are considered; Schumann and Mendelssohn also appear occasionally, especially in relation to earlier works such as the F minor symphony. But Spohr is hardly ever mentioned yet during the years Bruckner was growing up he was counted among the accepted “great” composers and his works appeared constantly in concert programmes. Spohr’s fellow composers seemed in little doubt about his stature. Mendelssohn wrote to Moscheles: “Even as a boy I had the greatest esteem for him in every respect and, with my riper years, this feeling has in no way been weakened.” Brahms said of Spohr’s *Jessonda*: “I find the opera magnificent. *Jessonda* captured my heart and I shall feel the same about it for the rest of my life.” Moscheles referred to “the great qualities which one knows and loves in Spohr; beautiful treatment of the subject, admirable modulation and instrumentation.” E. T. A. Hoffmann said of Spohr’s first symphony: “It raises the greatest and most beautiful hopes; we may congratulate ourselves that we can once again expect well-written symphonies.” Chopin commented that Spohr’s Octet was “lovely, exquisite.” Weber’s tribute was: “A brilliant and renowned artist whose honoured name cannot but awaken respect in all quarters.” Schumann ended a glowing review of Spohr’s Seventh Symphony with the inspiring call: “Let us follow him in art, in life ... may he stand with our greatest Germans as a shining example.” And Wagner’s obituary tribute was: “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!”

In fact, according to Bruckner specialist Peter Palmer, he often mentioned Spohr to his pupils and below appears Mr Palmer’s translation of an account of a dream by Bruckner which involved Spohr. So Bruckner would undoubtedly have known his compositions and indeed Spohr’s Ninth Violin Concerto (D minor, Op.55) was in the programme at the well-known disastrous premiere of Bruckner’s Third Symphony in Vienna on December 16, 1877.

So we should not be surprised to find that two of Spohr’s most popular works provide a definite pre-echo of the Austrian master. His Fourth Symphony (F major, Op.86) *Die Weihe der Töne* is based on a poem of that title by Carl Pfeiffer who died suddenly at the age of 28 in 1831. He had been the librettist of two Spohr operas and became a close friend of the composer. When Spohr took the cure at the spa of Nennstadt in 1832 he had with him a memorial volume of Pfeiffer’s poems which included “Die Weihe der Töne”. It deals with sound in all its manifestations; in nature, in love, the dance, the lullaby, in war, in celebration and in death.

As a tribute to Pfeiffer, Spohr decided to write a symphony based on the poem. The slow finale (“Funeral music and consolation through tears”) uses the chorale “Begrabt den Leib” and opens with sighing figures on the wind instruments accompanied by drum rolls. Then the cellos

and clarinet have the chorale tune to a halting pizzicato accompaniment¹. Here the resemblance of the texture to Bruckner is so strong that it immediately brings to mind the slow movement of the latter's own Fourth Symphony.

The other piece that Bruckner would certainly have known is the overture to *Jessonda*. The second subject consists of a dotted, dancing theme on the strings while the horns have a motif in longer notes marked *con espress*². In the opera the string theme is associated with the Portuguese army (the "goodies", as it were) and the horn theme with the Brahmins (the "baddies").

Spohr had done something similar with the second subject in the finale of his Piano and Wind Quintet of 1820 (a couple of years before the overture) with the piano having the lively theme and the wind instruments the broad one³ so he must have realised that this technique was an ideal way to symbolise the two rival factions in his overture. The parallel is with the finale of Bruckner's Third Symphony where a polka and a chorale are paired in exactly the same manner.

Finally, Spohr's Fifth Symphony in C minor of 1837 has a more general Bruckner feel to it, especially in the slow movement with its dotted rhythms and slow build-up to the climax followed by that quintessential romantic coda, lowing horn calls from afar. The scherzo also has a stamping Bruckner quality and its main theme is from the same coop as Bruckner's "cock crow" motif in the scherzo of his Seventh Symphony⁴.

However, Peter Palmer observes that most scholars have followed Robert Haas in arguing that the mature Bruckner had little in common with Spohr, Mendelssohn or Schumann. When Wilhelm Altmann suggested that Bruckner's chorale themes might owe something to Mendelssohn, this was treated with scepticism. On the other hand, Max Auer mentions Spohr twice in his (untranslated) *Life and Works of Bruckner*. He says of the ending to the lyrical second theme of Bruckner's First Symphony that "with its gentle chromaticism it is more reminiscent of Spohr than of Wagner." Of the orchestral introduction to the "Benedictus" of Bruckner's D minor Mass, Auer writes: "The 'Tristan' sigh in the last bar cannot have been taken from that work because Bruckner did not know it at the time. Incidentally, in the Adagio of his Double Violin Concerto, Spohr uses this suspended note with its resolution upwards in exactly the same way as Wagner."

Of course, Bruckner developed such an individual style that it would be nonsense to pretend that Spohr was a major influence on him. But it is demonstrably true that Spohr was as much part of Bruckner's musical background and development as Beethoven, Schubert and others and it is time that more Bruckner scholars became aware of the fact.

Notes:

- 1) See full score (Haslinger, Vienna, 1833), Edition No. 19, Plate No. 6534, fourth movement bars 1-46, pp.155-159 or facsimile in Louis Spohr: Three Symphonies [4, 6 and 7], pp.161-165, edited by Joshua Berrett, Series C: Volume IX of The Symphony 1720-1840, editor-in-chief Barry S Brook (Garland, New York, 1980).
- 2) See overture bars 103-121 and 185-203 in full score of opera edited by Gustav F Kogel, pp. 9-10 and 13-14 (Peters, Leipzig, 1881), Edition No. 2003, Plate No. 6489; full score of overture, Letters G-H and M-N, pp.8-9 and 11-12 (Breitkopf und Härtel, Leipzig, 1890), Edition No. PB257, Plate No. 18556; miniature score of overture, pp.22-25 and 37-40, edited by Antonio de Almeida (Heugel, Paris, 1962), Edition No. PH285, Plate No. H31741.
- 3) See Piano and Wind Quintet in C minor, Op. 52, finale *Allegro molto*, bars 73-111 and 249-295, edited by Eugen Schmitz, pp.62-64 and 72-75 (Bärenreiter, Kassel, 1956), Edition No. 2304.
- 4) Spohr: Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 102 (Haslinger, Vienna, 1840), Edition No. 618, Plate No. 7717; facsimile in *Selected Works of Louis Spohr* edited by Clive Brown, Volume Six: Symphonies [1, 2 and 5], pp. 243-398 (Garland, New York, 1987)