

THE DRAMATIC STYLE ACHIEVED: THREE SPOHR CONCERTOS

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With the author's kind permission we reprint here some extracts from his doctoral dissertation The Evolution of a Dramatic Compositional Style in the Violin Concertos of Louis Spohr (Indiana University, March 1995). The extracts deal with what Dr Sturm judges to be three key achievements in Spohr's evolution towards this dramatic style. They are preceded by the general introduction and an extract from Chapter One which defines this dramatic style

Introduction

LOUIS Spohr was esteemed in the years before 1850 as one of the greatest living composers, enjoying a popularity and respect that was equalled by only a few of the most influential musicians of his day. In 1854, J. W. Davison wrote that during Spohr's life he:

had pointed out a high road to excellence in which the rest endeavoured to walk; he had invented a new style with whose attractions the others were intoxicated. No composer was more idolized, emulated, and pillaged; the young musicians regarded him as a prophet; his method of harmony was lauded to the skies, and his knowledge of orchestral combinations pronounced unparalleled¹.

From this lofty pinnacle Spohr quickly passed into artistic neglect following his death in 1859. Critics since that time have suggested numerous causes for the ensuing disinterest, including a general lack of rhythmic vitality in Spohr's compositions and unimaginative scoring for orchestral accompaniments in his concertos. Perhaps the most encompassing problem was that Spohr's compositions rested solidly in and relied on the style of a single time period, and they were therefore unable to transcend that time to last into future generations. For more than half a century, however, Louis Spohr impressed royalty, composers, critics and general public alike with his performances and new compositions.

Spohr's musical life began with the development of his precocious talents as a violinist. His concert tours as a violin soloist began in his youth and continued throughout much of his adult life. His early efforts as a composer were also for the violin. His creative spirit, however, was larger than that of a concerto composer, and some of his greatest artistic triumphs were in the area of operatic composition. The true musical personality of Spohr was oriented toward dramatic composition.

Even though his ability to write violinistically was extremely refined, there exists in many of his concertos, especially the earlier ones, a dramatic quality that Spohr developed until it became a central force in his writing for the violin. In this light, many of the early violin concertos, written prior to Spohr's large operatic successes, may be viewed as media through which Spohr brought to the surface the inherently vocal personality that lay beneath the surface of his violin background.

The musical environment in which Spohr grew up, and that he inherited, was one in which opera assumed a dominant position in public interest. Its style pervaded the consciousness of many of the composers at the time, working its way into their instrumental compositions. Even Beethoven was affected by opera's dominant influence. Prior to his last works in which operatic influence had been deeply assimilated, he wrote under the influence of dramatic style in such

works as the slow movements of the Piano Concerto in G major and the Violin Concerto in D major.

The violin concertos by many composers working in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries manifest the influence of operatic style. From Giornovich through Viotti, Rode, and Kreutzer, the operatic influence is clear, particularly in the second movements of their concertos, which were fashioned after ternary operatic arias complete with embellished da capos. Viotti's style in particular was so influential at the end of the eighteenth century that it began a new school of violin playing and composition, which came to be known as the French school. Spohr followed the models of Viotti, Rode, and to some extent Giornovich in many ways, causing much recent scholarship to place him strongly under the influence of Viotti's French school and leave it at that. Closer examination, however, reveals that Spohr, within the larger parameters of a French school model, pursued his own interests and evolved an increasingly strong and individual dramatic style of violin playing.

For approximately forty years, Spohr's concertos provided what might now be viewed as a stylistic interlude in the development of the violin concerto. European audiences, between the years 1806 and 1845, had only two consistently available options in the violin concerto genre: those by the French school violinists – beginning with Viotti and sustained by his protégés Rode, Baillot, and Kreutzer among others – or those by Louis Spohr. Beethoven's violin concerto disappeared from the repertoire after its première in 1806 by Franz Clement until Joachim resurrected and championed it nearly fifty years later, and Mendelssohn's concerto received its première in 1845.

Paganini, the herald from the Italian school, maintained his career exclusively in Italy until 1828, when he was forty-five years old. Prior to that year his reputation outside Italy grew only via hearsay. The direct influence of his concertos upon other performers and composers was hindered by two other obstacles: he allowed only himself to be the performer of his compositions, and much of his music – including his first two violin concertos – was published only posthumously, after the midpoint of the century, when Spohr and his style were already fading in public esteem.

To assert that Spohr provided an antithesis to the French school violin concerto style, however, would be incorrect, since he avowed a deep debt to both the compositional and performing styles of Pierre Rode, a Viotti protégé. The indebtedness to Rode remained even twenty years later in the typically French dotted rhythms and melodic contours that comprised the Rondo finales of his concertos. Yet other influences also exerted themselves upon Spohr in his formative years. His exposure to the operas and chamber music of Mozart, to Beethoven's Opus 18 string quartets, and to the music of Cherubini, Dussek, and Field also contributed to what ultimately became Spohr's unique early Romantic musical language.

At least two distinctive styles arise in Spohr's concertos: a lighter style that clearly derives from the influence of Rode and the French violin school, and a deeper more dramatic style for which the influence is less direct. The French style is typified by diatonic harmonies, pairs of four-bar phrases, predictable cadences, and dotted rhythms. The dramatic style emphasizes chromatic harmonies and melodic embellishment, fluid rhythmic patterns, phrases of varying lengths, and a kinship with operatic recitative. One of the attributes of this style is that it has an air of spontaneous composition. Passages written in this manner often approach the mood of a cadenza. The two styles seem to be mutually exclusive; the French style appears in all of Spohr's concerto finales and also makes appearances in the technical figurations of his first movements. The dramatic style is more subtle, and is restricted to first, and occasionally second, movements.

This document studies the development of the dramatic style in Spohr's violin concertos and

shows that, within the first eight concertos he composed, Spohr used the violin concerto as a medium through which he evolved an increasingly integrated dramatic style. His Eighth Concerto employed all of the extroverted dramatic elements currently available that the Italian audiences, for which it was written, enjoyed, and it became the culmination of Spohr's dramatic writing within the medium of the violin concerto.

By the time Spohr had completed his Eighth Concerto, he had also completed *Faust*, his first operatic triumph, and it is possible to consider that, having found a successful voice in the dramatic medium, Spohr ceased to need the violin concerto to develop his dramatic personality. The writing in his concertos nos. 9, 11, 13, 14, and 15 shows his dramatic creativity reaching no new levels of integration into the violinistic medium. Concerto No.12 stands alone as, perhaps, a final synthesis of concerto and drama now fully integrated and absorbed to a level of intimacy, resulting in a composition that is predominantly an introverted cadenza, a personal musing by the violin in the context of an orchestral accompaniment. Spohr was by that time an experienced and mature dramatic composer, and while he still performed on and wrote for the violin, the need to work out dramatic style through the medium of the concerto had been exhausted and was replaced by numerous successes in operatic composition.

At this stage it is important to define what is meant when referring to Spohr's "dramatic style." 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.

Chronology

OF THE three extracts featured here, the Sixth Concerto was composed in Gotha towards the close of 1808 and early in 1809; the Eighth dates from late April and early May, 1816, in the

Bernese Oberland village of Thierachern where the Spohrs were on holiday while preparing for their Italian journey; and the Twelfth was composed in Kassel in April and May, 1828².

Concerto No.6:II

THE second movement of the Sixth Concerto provides the central focus for Spohr's development of dramatic writing. Here for the first time he writes a real recitative for the solo violin. Recitative style, from Handel through Mozart up until Spohr's contemporaries, used short, intervallic ideas presented in a declamatory style, frequently within the context of either a chromatic or quickly modulating harmonic setting. The brevity of the musical ideas combined with the chromatic context to move the drama forward, leaving no sense of arrival until the aria, at which point diatonic harmonies and longer phrases created a more focused context that allowed the reflective role of the aria to predominate.

Spohr was the first composer of violin concertos to bring the recitative style to the concerto. His predecessors, such as Giomovichi, and contemporaries from the French school (Viotti, Rode, and Kreutzer), had already transferred the operatic aria to their concerto slow movements and evolved it into a highly embellished form. The recitative style, however, had been left untouched, possibly because these composers wrote using a predominantly diatonic language, to which recitative was less well accommodated.

Spohr's evolving style in his earlier concertos had combined abrupt chromatic shifts and short melodic units, interspersed with brief linking cadenzas. His solo violin entrances, following the initial tutti, had occasionally added dramatic embellishment to the principal theme, and he had experimented with a cadenza in the Fifth Concerto in which the soloist added a textural embellishment to the tutti theme. All of these techniques pointed toward the operatic stage as their source. It seems logical that the next step for Spohr would be to return these diverse dramatic practices to their original context and compose a recitative for the violin. It also seems logical that the second movement would be where he first tried his idea out; it had been associated with dramatic aria style for several decades in the concertos of Giomovichi and Viotti, among others. Since one operatic element was already in place in the second movement, it was not too difficult to insert a recitative prior to the aria which people were already accustomed to hearing.

The recitative in the Sixth Concerto combined the expected short, declamatory statements and frequent cadences with a strong chromatic context. It begins and ends in G minor, yet it moves immediately at its conclusion through a one-measure transition to begin an aria in the related key of B flat major. In the recitative's first half, Spohr writes a virtually complete chromatic descent from G to G an octave below. The descent is shared by tutti and solo within a series of textural exchanges.

Example 1 begins in the fourth measure of the movement and shows the orchestra initiating the descent in the bass line from G through F sharp, F natural, and E in measures 4-7. The solo violin continues the descent through D and D flat in measures 8 and 9, whereupon the orchestra returns, carrying the D flat down to C, C flat, and B flat in measures 10-12. The violin picks up the B flat and completes the descent through A flat and G in measures 13-16.

The chromatic content of this first section of the recitative shifts immediately into a more diatonic, flowing recitative in the key of E flat major, as seen excerpted in *Example 2*. An eight-bar Allegro in the more crisply punctuated style of the recitative's first part returns the key to G minor prior to the aria. The traditional operatic aria that follows in the related key of B flat major is interrupted once by a brief recitative in B flat, serving as both transition and textural interruption. The aria resumes, still in B flat major, although more embellished, and concludes the movement without returning to G minor.

There is no doubt about the dramatic content of this movement. The recitative contains all of the requisite characteristics of an operatic composition, remaining distinct from the aria in texture, chromatic content, and key. This is Spohr's first definitive piece of dramatic music for the violin, moving considerably beyond the mere inclusion of an operatic aria second movement that had been the style used by his predecessors. Without the experiments, without the evolution of style from the earlier concertos, such a movement might not have been as clear an option.

Concerto No.8

IN THE Eighth Violin Concerto, Spohr achieved one pinnacle in his efforts toward writing dramatic-vocal music for the violin. This concerto brings the style and technique of vocal recitative to the foreground, giving it primary importance, especially through its appearance as the entire first movement of the concerto. As discussed above, 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.

It is no accident that the decision to write an entire concerto in an extroverted vocal style coincided with Spohr's trip to Italy. He knew the reputation of the Italian orchestras, particularly their poor technique, sight reading skills, and ensemble playing. By writing a violin concerto similar in style to the operas the Italians were accustomed to performing, his chances of a clean, accurate accompaniment improved significantly.

The practical benefits of writing an operatic concerto aside, the evolution of his style also peaked at that time. Spohr had already written dramatic second movements, had already explored the cadenza as an element in a French concerto movement, and had already imbued his themes with the qualities of recitative that lay in short melodic units, chromatic harmonies, and cadential flourishes. The next step was to move beyond the form of the French concerto and write a dramatic concerto, or, to use Spohr's words, a *Gesangszene* for the violin.

The Eighth Concerto begins in a standard French fashion with a strong, dotted, orchestral introduction. It is the solo's first entrance that ushers in the surprise: a vocal recitative. The soloist then weaves fragments of recitative around excerpts of the opening theme in the orchestra. *Example 3* begins at the solo entrance, showing its clear recitative for three measures, after which the orchestra enters in measure 31 with the principal theme of the orchestral exposition.

This alternation between solo recitative and orchestral theme continues for thirty-two measures, after which the orchestra's role becomes that of punctuating the recitative lines with block chords, as seen in measures 72-77 of *Example 4*.

In the first solo section of this movement, the recitative functions as a commentary over the orchestral theme. This compositional style had made an appearance in the Seventh Concerto as the soloist commented over its two-measure principal theme. The use of this style in the two concertos is similar, with the exception that in Concerto No.8 the commentary appears within the context of a distinctive recitative.

In the Eighth Concerto, Spohr elevates recitative to become an entire movement. The recitative's conclusion moves without pause into the second movement, which is cast outwardly as an aria; however, its central section again uses the soloist for non-melodic declamation over an orchestral theme, a technique that Spohr had earlier used in the seventh and tenth published concertos. The orchestral theme that continues throughout the central section is Italianate in character: repeated sixteenth notes accompany an off-beat melody over a slow harmonic rhythm, as seen in *Example 5*.

Spohr unifies the Eighth Concerto by giving part of the first movement theme to the soloist in the second movement. A theme from measures 15 and 16 of the orchestral exposition returns,

slightly modified, as the main thematic idea for the soloist in measures 139 and following in the central section of the slow movement. *Examples 6 (a)* and *(b)* juxtapose both locations in the concerto. Recitative returns at the conclusion of the aria to link the second movement to the third, thereby connecting all movements in this concerto without pause.

The finale has the basic shape and character of many of Spohr's earlier first movements. Its bold character, imitative style in the tutti, and reliance upon a predominant theme with one contrasting theme are typical of Spohr's earlier opening movements. The Eighth Concerto's third movement is interesting in a discussion of Spohr's dramatic style for two reasons. First, the contrasting thematic idea that occurs in the centre of the movement (mm. 288-89, 290-91 and 292-93 in *Example 7*) uses Spohr's two-measure melodic units that end on weaker, internal beats of the measure, usually following an appoggiatura. Thus, this thematic idea borrows the shape and character of a recitative in the same way that the themes from several of his earlier first movements did.

Spohr's inclusion of a cadenza in the third movement is also important. His interest in the cadenza appears not to have been entirely suspended in favour of the recitative's new prominence in this concerto. The finale concludes with a written out cadenza in the old style that occurs following a tonic six-four at the conclusion of the movement. Though this does not necessarily represent an advance since it follows traditional models, it does show Spohr keeping both elements of drama – recitative and cadenza – present in the Eighth Concerto. It also shows Spohr's sensitivity to the Italian audiences' expectations. Italian opera of the early nineteenth century relied strongly upon the vocal-dramatic talents of the lead singers, particularly the castrati, who were noted for inserting extensive cadenzas into their arias. A violin concerto, especially one following Italian operatic styles and forms, would most likely evoke a stronger audience response if it also concluded with a cadenza.

Though the Eighth Concerto makes large strides forward in the extroverted use of dramatic style, it is conservative in its harmonic language. The chromatic context that Spohr had integrated into his previous concertos is all but absent here, as is the previous interest in tonic evasion and the use of suspensions. The reason can be attributed again to the fact that the Italian audiences would have had little appreciation for elaborate, chromatic harmony. The most obvious chromatic techniques occur in the use of modal mixture to facilitate modulation to chromatic third-related keys, and in the use of occasional chromatic sequences.

An example of the kind of brief modal inflection that Spohr uses to initiate a modulation appears in measure 130 of *Example 8*. A single E flat in the solo line serves as a pivot from C major to A flat major. Although the E flat by itself is an acceptable alteration to the melodic line, following three repetitions of the same motive in C major during the previous four measures, the sudden shift to A flat major is still a surprise, carrying the import of the E flat farther than a modulation to C minor, for example, would have taken it.

The peak that occurred in the Eighth Concerto involved giving recitative its greatest scope; Spohr devoted an entire movement to the recitative style, and an opening movement at that. The same peak in the cadenza style would have to wait until Spohr completed his Twelfth Concerto.

Concerto No.12 (Concertino No.1)

SPOHR'S Twelfth Concerto heads the final group of four concertos that Spohr composed, three of them diminutive in size, and thus often called concertinos instead. The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Concertos have only two movements each, while the Twelfth Concerto, which is similar in design to the Eighth Concerto, unites three movements without pause and begins with an incomplete movement that serves more as an extended prologue to the second movement than as a movement in its own right. The *recitative-aria-cavatina* shape seen earlier in the Eighth

Concerto becomes *cadenza/recitative-aria-rondo alla polacca* in the Twelfth. The Twelfth Concerto, however, is more reflective, and it maintains throughout a more legato, intimate style. The boundary between first and second movement, therefore, becomes less audible, although it is clearly marked in the score.

The Twelfth Concerto also extends the idea of a cyclic return of themes that Spohr had touched upon in his Eleventh Concerto with the use of an orchestral theme from the introduction, and in his Eighth Concerto as he transferred a motive from the first to the second movements. Here Spohr brings back a significant portion of the earlier movements. The rondo finale brings back all three melodic ideas from the orchestral opening of the first movement, as well as a solo cadential arpeggio from the first movement and the codetta theme from the second movement. It would appear, therefore, that Spohr had altered his idea of a single movement concerto in several parts. Whereas his Eighth Concerto twelve years earlier had linked three movements primarily through the use of incomplete cadences and attacca markings, the Twelfth Concerto added to the earlier technique by linking all three movements thematically as well.

The dramatic characteristics that had suffused Spohr's earlier concertos return in the Twelfth, saturating it with a sense of spontaneous composition. 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, and its stature as a complete entity is compromised only by its not being harmonically autonomous. The first movement does not cadence in its originating key of A major, and the cadence that concludes the movement also initiates the second movement. The first movement cadenza, therefore, serves the function of a prelude to the aria in the second movement in much the same manner as the recitative prepared the aria in the Eighth Concerto.

The legato cadenza from the first movement's solo entrance, played against the chordal accompaniment in the tutti strings, is shown between measures 18 and 29 of *Example 9*. In measure 29, the soloist concludes the accompanied cadenza with a recitative-style half cadence that is completed by the orchestra into measure 30.

The Twelfth Concerto, therefore, provides us with Spohr's final effort to compose a completely dramatic piece for violin and orchestra. Dramatic style reaches a second peak in this concerto, similar to the peak achieved by the Eighth Concerto, yet there are differences. The earlier concerto, written for an audience that appreciated the obvious in music, had emphasized literal recitative and aria sections. It had been a bold move in the concerto genre because the extent of its reliance upon vocal forms and styles had been unprecedented. The Twelfth Concerto emphasizes instead the accompanied cadenza, with its own elevation to the stature of a movement. Its context is more subtle harmonically and texturally, leaving an introverted impression that contrasts with the extroverted Eighth Concerto. Again, there is a sense of maturity to the tone of the movement that replaces the youthful bravura found in the

Gesangszene. Spohr writes the Twelfth Concerto from middle age, and the result is a more serene fusion of dramatic style with personal musing.

Musical examples

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a violin and piano reduction. The first system, starting at measure 4, features a violin line with a melodic line and a piano accompaniment with a *pp* dynamic. The second system, starting at measure 9, includes a violin line, piano accompaniment, and woodwinds (Flute and Clarinet) with a *pp* dynamic and a *cresc.* marking. The third system, starting at measure 14, shows the violin line and piano accompaniment with a *p* dynamic.

Example 1: Spohr: Violin Concerto No.6 in G minor, Op.28, Mvt. II, mm. 4-16. Violin/piano reduction score.

17 A

20 Sopra una corda

23

Example 2: Spohr: Violin Concerto No.6 in G minor, Op.28, Mvt. II, mm. 17-23. Violin/ piano reduction score.

Violine **B**

Recit. **Tempo I**

32

36 **C**

(rit.) *in tempo* *dolce*

Example 3: Spohr: Violin Concerto No.8 in A minor, Op.47, Mvt. I, mm. 28-43. Violin/piano reduction score.

E

sf *pp* *f* *p* *cresc.*

ff Recit.

Example 4: Spohr: Violin Concerto No.8 in A minor, Op.47, Mvt. I, mm. 72-77. Violin/piano reduction score.

Example 5: Spohr: Violin Concerto No.8 in A minor, Op.47, Mvt. II, mm. 130-132. Violin/ piano reduction score.

(a)

(b) K

(1:2)

Example 6: Spohr: Violin Concerto No.8 in A minor, Op.47, (a) Mvt. I, mm. 14-18, theme in orchestra; (b) Mvt. II, mm. 139-142, solo theme. Violin/piano reduction score.

287 S

dolce

p

291

(pp)

pp

Example 7: Spohr: Violin Concerto No.8 in A minor, Op.47, Mvt. III, mm. 287-294. Violin/ piano reduction score.

125 H

f

p

f

ppp

129 I

p

f

p

cresc.

f

Example 8: Spohr: Violin Concerto No.8 in A minor, Op.47, Mvt. II, mm. 125-132. Violin/ piano reduction score.

18 *Senza rigore di tempo*

p *cresc.* *f*

Solo.

pp *p* *f*

22 *dim.* *cresc.* *f*

25 *dim.* *p* *f* *dim.*

28 **B** *a tempo*

Tutti.

pp *p* *cresc.*

Example 9: Spohr: Violin Concerto No.12 in A major, Op.79, Mvt. I, mm. 18-30. Violin/ piano reduction score.

Notes

1. J. W. Davison, *The Musical World* 29 (1854), p.252; quoted in Clive Brown: *Louis Spohr: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 2
2. The autograph of the Sixth has disappeared but the Eighth is in the Städtische Musikbibliothek, Leipzig, and the Twelfth in the Universitätsbibliothek, Basel