

THE HISTORICAL SYMPHONY AS POSTMODERN DISCOURSE

by Keith Warsop

POSTMODERNISM before modernism? Well, for Spohr there was a modernism which he found not entirely to his taste though he championed some of its adherents, notably Wagner for reasons which the younger composer later described as “because he had been pleased to find in me a young artist who was really in earnest about everything pertaining to his art”¹; or as Spohr himself wrote: “It [The Flying Dutchman] is written apparently with true inspiration – and unlike so much of the modern opera music, does not display in every bar a striving after effect, or effort to please ... In this work at least his aspirations are noble, and that pleases me at a time when all depends on creating a sensation, or in effecting the merest eartickling”².

But postmodernism, which takes the view that there is no necessary progress in the arts, that therefore an artist is not outmoded if he fails to write in the manner of the avant garde and that, further, an artist may range across the whole history of music, even juxtaposing the most unlikely of bedfellows so that a Tchaikovsky waltz may succeed a Charleston or precede strict serialism or complete indeterminacy? Jeremy Hawthorn³ has noted that postmodernism can include “the rejection of representation in favour of self-reference – especially of a ‘playful’ and non-serious, non-constructive sort; the willing, even relieved, rejection of artistic aura and the sense of the work of art as organic whole; the substitution of confrontation and teasing of the reader for collaboration with him or her; the rejection of ‘character’ and ‘plot’ as meaningful and artistically defensible concepts or conventions; even the rejection of meaning itself as a hopeless delusion.” At the root of postmodernism lies a lack of belief in the historical progress of the arts. After modernism, where can we go? Anywhere!

Jonathan D. Kramer⁴ has put forward an analysis of Nielsen’s Sixth Symphony *Sinfonia semplice* as a postmodern work and explains: “Postmodern! In 1925? People who debate whether Nielsen was a modernist or a latterday romantic may be surprised to find this piece offered as an example of an aesthetic that has received widespread recognition in music only since 1980. But postmodernism is understood better as an attitude than as a historical period: it is more than simply the music after modernism. Thus, while most postmodern pieces are recent, postmodernism has antecedents in earlier music. Some previous composers – Mahler and Ives as well as Nielsen – embraced at least some aspects of the aesthetic.” He goes on to say of postmodernism: “It is impossible to give a rigorous or even wholly consistent definition, because postmodernism thrives on contradiction. It would, furthermore, require more space than I am about to devote to the symphony to elucidate musical postmodernism adequately. Let me say simply that a lot of postmodern music freely intermixes contradictory styles and techniques; that it is not overly concerned with unity; that it revels in eclecticism; that it delights in ambiguity; that it includes aspects of both modernism and pre-modernism; that it does not recognize a distinction between vernacular and art music, nor between the vulgar and the sublime; that it does not respect history but rather believes that all kinds of music are part of the here and now.”

Spohr obviously thought he was showing the historical progress of music in his symphony but to him it had reached almost perfection with the masterpieces of Haydn, Mozart and early Beethoven so that when, in the July of 1839 he began composing the *Historical Symphony*, he felt that the “modern” or “latest of the new” was a step too far. In accommodating this view he

unknowingly embraced the postmodernist aesthetic.

Indeed, Peter Skrine⁵ has pointed out that some of the basic ideas of postmodernism “seem to me to go back to German Romanticism with its ‘ironic’ delight in adopting the styles, manner and themes of past periods in ‘modern’ works; in the context of German Romanticism ‘romantic irony’ means that the artist can demonstrate his own superiority to his work by deliberately interrupting or destroying the illusion he has created. In this sense Spohr was never more ‘romantic’ than in the *Historical*. That leads one straight away into contradicting the views of both Paul Katow⁶ and, perhaps oddly, Schumann. But in some ways Schumann’s romanticism was of a later kind. If Spohr was now being regarded as ‘old-fashioned’ by 1839, it was at least in part because he was harking back, albeit in musical terms, to the early romanticism of Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck in the 1790s, while also reaching forward to the later 20th century – by re-engaging a kind of ‘romanticism’ which enjoys playing with the potential of artistic ideas it likes while sending up those it rejects.”

This whole concept implies the rejection of the work of art as an organic unity in the sense of a “proper” symphony. As part of teasing the listener and playing “games” with the material Spohr keeps a presence for the artist in each of the movements – hence Schumann’s famous criticism: “These forms to which he is not accustomed bring out his individuality even more strongly, just as one with a particularly characteristic bearing reveals himself most clearly when he assumes a disguise ... when this symphony was played one could hear from every corner of the hall the sound ‘Spohr’ and again ‘Spohr’ ”⁷.

It reminds one of the way in which Spohr’s friend, the writer Jean Paul, keeps popping up as a character in his own novels to undermine the objectivity of his narrative ; as Timothy J. Casey says: “with a narrator who plays up his own presence and parades his artistry and, indeed, the artificiality of the work ... not only does he constantly interfere with his characters and interrupt their stories; at any moment in a Jean Paul novel one might meet Jean Paul himself wandering through the book, perhaps composing another book or in the company of characters from other books, who may themselves be composing books that elsewhere seem to be Jean Paul compositions”⁸. Spohr got to know Jean Paul while director of the Frankfurt opera in 1818 and records in his memoirs that his recently composed set of string quartets, Op.45, made a great impression on the writer. Spohr says that after hearing Op.45, No.1 in C major, Jean Paul “ascribed to it a highly poetical significance of which, while composing it, I certainly never thought, but which recurred in a striking manner to my mind at every subsequent performance”. Disappointingly, Spohr fails to tell us what Jean Paul’s “programme” was.

In the *Historical Symphony* the games begin with the very first movement “The Age of Bach and Handel”. The music has clear resemblances to specific works by the two Baroque masters, Bach’s C major fugue from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book One and Handel’s *Messiah*, both the “Pastoral Symphony” and the duet “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd”, while Joshua Berrett⁹ has also noted as “a touch of Baroque authenticity ... the cadence on the dominant of the relative major which punctuates the arrival of the *Pastorale* (G major)”. However, he also points to un-Baroque insertions; “the direct octaves (m36), resolution of the tritone by parallel motion (mm37-38) and a ritard anticipating the *Pastorale*”. We also have the major contradiction: that the Bach-Handel thematic material is used in a symphonic first movement and one moreover that opens with a slow introduction, *Largo grave*, which, as in Haydn’s Symphony No.98, provides the main theme of the following *Allegro moderato*. On the other hand, the exposition deals with the theme contrapuntally and with Baroque-style sequences, while the *Pastorale* takes the place of a development section before the recapitulation of the fugal material. So it could be argued that, despite the contrapuntal treatment, the plan of the movement hardly follows one from the

Bach-Handel period when what symphonies there were, anyway, lasted in total only as long as this single movement. It is in the *Pastorale* that Spohr inserts his “visiting-card”, the most direct reminder that he is the “game-maker”; bar 60 has slurred crotchet-quavers with off-beat accents on the quavers, a fingerprint which turns up in many Spohr works (see *Example 1*).

The Haydn-Mozart *Larghetto* (the *Adagio* on the title page was merely the conventional German way of referring to “slow movement”) continues the games. For though the two great classical masters are linked together in the movement’s title, Haydn disappears from view when the music starts. Remember, however, that Haydn has already put in an appearance in “Bach-Handel” with the characteristic use of a symphony opening with a slow introduction which, when speeded up, provides the main theme of the *Allegro*. Now, for the slow movement, we have a touching and beautiful tribute to Spohr’s hero Mozart with themes which sound as if they have been lifted from his 38th and 39th symphonies but are actually closely modelled pastiches. Again, Spohr reminds us that he stands behind this evocation of Mozart; in the bars from 41 on, the dotted Mozartian phrase is shortened and transformed into a figure which instantly brings to mind the opening of Spohr’s Nonet! (see *Example 2*)

If Haydn is missing from the second movement, where is Beethoven in the Scherzo which bears his name? Certainly the opening on the three timpani takes as its inspiration Beethoven’s use of timpani in his Seventh Symphony in which Spohr played at its 1813 première in Vienna. But many critics have struggled to find other Beethoven procedures in this Scherzo. The “game” here is that in “the age of Beethoven”, one younger composer active at the time was Louis Spohr. Indeed, this Scherzo (tonality apart) would sit quite happily in Spohr’s First Symphony of 1811 or Second of 1820. Here, Spohr steps out of the shadows to establish just where he thinks he stands in the historical progression so, in the Scherzo, there is no need for a Spohrian fingerprint to appear for just a bar or two as he is all over the music. Instead, it is Beethoven who is allowed an occasional appearance; the role of the timpani and the short grace note in the theme of the Trio (see *Example 3*). Note, too, that in the reprise of the Scherzo, at bar 247, the grace note from the Trio makes a sly and solitary reappearance in the second violins; Beethoven peeps out again (see *Example 4*).

Schumann wrote that the finale “the Newest or Latest of the New” was “a complete failure. Such noises might be produced by Auber, Meyerbeer and the like, but Spohr should not lend his pen to writing such stuff”¹⁰. The fact is that he did and, in writing to a friend, said that some thought he was satirising the modern school and others that the movement was meant to show how far more effective the latest compositional style could be. Spohr explained: “As these contradictions are the best description of the latest music, I can well be content with the effect produced by the last movement”¹¹. In other words, the contradictions are inherent in the conception and it is a postmodern outlook that views “either ... or” as mutually compatible at the same time as they remain incompatible. It was this feeling that Spohr should have written a Beethovenian summation to his symphony which led Mendelssohn to request “a greater instrumental piece in freer form, somewhat like the overture to *Faust* or so many of your magnificent, spirited overtures in its place”¹².

Spohr, however, did not replace or revise this movement in which there are contradictions and contrasts of metre, tempo and style. Over some 40 bars we meet six alternations of time signature while, thematically, the bombastic overture-like opening is succeeded by dainty French ballet music. Spohr again inserts a musical fingerprint, this time a lead-in figure which first appears in bars 61-70 on oboe and flute, then in bars 254-261 on clarinet and oboe (see *Example 5*) before finally turning up in the second violins in bars 310-319 where it is revealed as an extension of the “ballet music’s” variant theme!

The differences between the movements are accentuated by differences in orchestration with a gradual growth in size. “Bach-Handel” is scored for the usual strings plus two each of flutes, oboes, horns and bassoons; “Haydn-Mozart” adds two clarinets; “Beethoven” adds three timpani; and the finale expands to a full-blown romantic orchestra with the inclusion of piccolo, two more horns, two trumpets, three trombones, triangle, cymbals, bass drum and side drum.

Also embedded in the symphony are some interpretative contrasts and contradictions which the conductor must resolve. They are perhaps best exemplified by the two Compact Disc recordings released in recent years. These are Orfeo C094-841A (issued 1984) with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Karl Anton Rickenbacher, coupled with Spohr’s Ninth Symphony; and Marco Polo 8.223439 (issued 1992) with the Czecho-Slovak State Philharmonic Orchestra (Košice) conducted by Alfred Walter, coupled with Spohr’s Third Symphony. The timings of the movements on the two recordings will prove useful for the comments which follow:

	<i>Rickenbacher</i>	<i>Walter</i>
“Bach-Handel”	6:08	7:27
“Haydn-Mozart”	6:53	9:17
“Beethoven”	6:03	6:26
“Newest”	6:43	6:30
Total time	25:47	29:40

Rickenbacher’s “Bach-Handel” sounds as if the conductor has been influenced by the “period instrument” approach to Baroque music; nearly everything is light and kept moving whereas Walter takes the movement as if Furtwängler or Sir Henry Wood were at the helm. Both versions are convincing but Walter’s perhaps has the greater weight for the opening movement of a symphony – even one as unconventional as the *Historical*. The question arises, of course, as to how Spohr conducted it and he most likely looked on Baroque performing practice as outmoded and certainly inefficient. The two conductors take their two distinct approaches into the “Haydn-Mozart” movement too but Walter, though much broader in tempo, keeps the movement within bounds and does not inflate it to inappropriate Brucknerian proportions. Again, both are convincing, despite their differences. The conductors come closest together in their “Beethoven” Scherzo; here Rickenbacher has a slight edge with a bit more urgency and liveliness. Finally, the finale. Does one attempt to make it sound “respectable”, a “proper” symphony finale, or does one pull out all the stops with the bombast and the noise? Rickenbacher inclines to the former view, playing down the percussion a little, and Walter to the latter, taking what would seem to be a more “postmodern” view of the music.

So, Spohr brought the academic study of the history of music out of the textbooks and, filtered through his composerly imagination, into real sound, real music. In so doing he inevitably stamped some of his personality on this music which in turn makes it a real work of art. That, in yoking together four different periods of music, he also produced inconsistencies and anomalies along with reminiscences appropriate for the periods, ensured a work which looks as if it had been waiting for our age of postmodernism to find its place and win appreciation.

For all of the above would be merely pretentious waffle were it not for the changing status of and attitudes to the *Historical Symphony*. The best way to explain how this has come about is an approach to it through the postmodern sensibility which is also the best way to accept and live with its manifest clashes of style and content. How else to explain the popularity of its second movement on the British radio station Classic FM where it makes regular appearances. And how else to explain the latest entry on the Marco Polo recording of the symphony in the recently revised and updated edition of *The Penguin Guide to Compact Discs*¹³ where the

anonymous reviewer says: “The *Historical Symphony* is a fascinating pastiche. [It] is most endearing in its respect for the great masters. It opens with a solemn, full-orchestral treatment of the *C major fugue* from Book I of Bach’s ‘18’, and also introduces pastoral reminders of Handel’s *Messiah*, including an allusion to ‘He shall feed his flock’. The slow movement, richly scored, remembers both Mozart’s *39th* and *Prague Symphonies*, and in the curiously lyrical scherzo, the timpani (rather too muted here) recall the Beethoven of the *Seventh Symphony*, which Spohr greatly admired, having taken part in its première under the composer. The inappropriately but agreeably frivolous finale, ‘the latest of the new’, then bursts with energy, drawing on the vivacious ideas of Adam and Auber, in particular the *Muette de Portici* overture. Walter is a convincing exponent of this curiously balanced work and his orchestra respond with enthusiasm”.

In conclusion, to describe the *Historical Symphony* as a success or as a failure is meaningless from the postmodernist aesthetic. It exists for what it is and if attitudes to the symphony are changing we should remember that the music itself has not changed. Instead, it is the ears of the listeners which are changing ... and the fact that these ears belong to our postmodern times seems to have a significant bearing on the symphony’s growing acceptance.

Musical examples

Violin I
Violin 2
Violin 3
Viola
Cello
C' basso

Example 1: First movement: Spohr fingerprint in bar 60 in violin 1 (also flute 1 and oboe 1).

Clarinet I
Clarinet 2
Corno I
Corno 2
Fag. I
Fag. 2

Example 2: Second movement: Spohr fingerprint from bar 42 on clarinet 1 and bassoon 1.

Example 3: Third movement: Theme of Trio with "Beethoven" short grace note, bar 95.

Example 4: Third movement: Grace note returns in Scherzo reprise in violin 2, bar 247.

Example 5: Fourth movement: Spohr fingerprint from bar 252 in oboe 1, then clarinet 1.

Notes

1. As translated in Dorothy Moulton Mayer: *The Forgotten Master: The Life & Times of Louis Spohr* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959), pp. 159
2. As translated in Clive Brown: *Louis Spohr: A Critical Biography*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 274
3. Jeremy Hawthorn: *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. Second edition (London: Arnold, 1994), pp. 122-123
4. Jonathan D. Kramer: "Unity and Disunity in Nielsen's Sixth Symphony" in *The Nielsen Companion*

- (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 293-294
5. Prof. Peter Skrine, co-author of *A Companion to German Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997): Private correspondence with the author of this essay
 6. See Paul Katow: *Louis Spohr: Persönlichkeit und Werk* (Luxembourg: RTL, 1983), pp. 95-96
 7. As translated in Clive Brown: *op. cit.*, p. 245
 8. Timothy J. Casey: *Jean Paul: A Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 6
 9. Joshua Berrett: *Louis Spohr: Three Symphonies, 4, 6, 7*. (New York: Garland, 1980, Series C, Volume IX in *The Symphony 1720-1840*, editor-in-chief Barry S. Brook), pp. xxv-xxvii
 10. Clive Brown: *op. cit.*, same passage
 11. As summarised and translated in Dorothy Moulton Mayer: *op. cit.*, p. 152
 12. As translated in Clive Brown: *op. cit.*, p. 244
 13. See 1999 edition, p. 1371