

THE ALLEGED INFERIORITY OF SPOHR'S LATER MUSIC

by Keith Warsop

IT HAS long been accepted in the world of Spohr scholarship that his later works in general are weaker than the earlier ones. Indeed, this attitude goes right back to Spohr's lifetime, summed up by John Warrack as: "the general view that Spohr had begun to exhaust his own vein of inspiration towards the end of his career"¹. For instance, Spohr's pupil and later assistant Moritz Hauptmann, said: "Spohr's second attempt in a new genre is like a lake or a pool, which owes its formation to the fresh springs of his first inspiration; it is exquisitely clear and the banks are lovely, but the mighty rush of the original stream is lovelier still"². Others who put forward similar views are detailed by Clive Brown in various later chapters of his "life and works" book. One example: he quotes Hans von Bülow's 1849 entry in a humorous 'Prophetic Musical Calendar' for 1859 where he wrote: "Spohr composes his Eighth Symphony yet again without realising it"³.

But such responses are often stock ones involving a prolific "elder statesman" of music. Haydn and Verdi are perhaps unusual in that their reputations not only remained high but also increased towards the end of their lives. Far more common is the treatment meted out to Spohr. In Britain, for instance, composers as distinguished as Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Walton had to suffer such criticism and it took some years to elapse after their deaths before their music, especially their later works, recaptured critical acclaim. Internationally, composers such as Rossini⁴, Rachmaninov, Strauss and Hindemith are just a few famous names whose later works were considered inferior to their earlier ones though at the present time they seem to have overcome that criticism.

Spohr's case differs from these because so far there has been no general critical revision of the standard view of his later works. Yet, if we accept for the moment that Spohr's later works do show a decline, then if we ask when that decline started, we face conflicting opinions.

Hans Glenewinkel would put it as early as String Quintet No.4, Op.91 of 1833-34, saying that the work includes many of the recurring characteristics of Spohr's later style: "dryness, a sober, rather wooden manner and a lack of flexibility"⁵. Hartmut Becker dates the alleged decline to around 1840 and suggests personal circumstances behind what he calls the "peculiar discrepancy" in quality between Symphony No.6 to No.9 and the first five: "Between 1831 and 1838 Louis Spohr lost his brother, his first wife Dorette and his youngest daughter. These deaths not only robbed him of three especially close relatives but – in the case of his wife – also of that intellectual, critical sparring partner which was so necessary to his nature"⁶. Clive Brown seems less certain. While he finds weaknesses in a number of works from the 1840s – the opera *Die Kreuzfahrer* (1844), Violin Concerto No.15, Op.128 (1844), String Quintet No.6, Op.129 (1845), Piano Quintet, Op.130 (1845), String Quartet No.31, Op.132 (1846) and Piano Trio No.4, Op.133 (1846) – he also praises a large number: Piano Trio No.1, Op.119 (1841), Symphony No.7, Op.121 (1841), Piano Trio No.2, Op.123 (1842), Piano Trio No.3, Op.124 (1842), Piano Sonata, Op.125 (1843), Quartet-Concerto, Op.131 (1845), Double Quartet No.4, Op.136 (1847), Symphony No.8, Op.137 (1847), Sextet, Op.140 (1848), String Quartet No.32, Op.141 (1849) and Piano Trio No.5, Op.142 (1849)⁷. Finally, he opts for the decline setting in during the early 1850s: "There had been a sharp decline in the quality of Spohr's output after 1850"⁸.

It is even more confusing if we ask which specific works are evidence for this decline. Before examining this evidence we must remind ourselves that Spohr was a reasonably prolific composer and like many of his kind, weak works can appear from any period of his compositional activity – for instance String Quartet No.3 (*Quatuor brillant* No.1), Op.11 (1807) in his Gotha period; String Quintet No.1, Op.33/1 (1814) from Vienna; String Quartet No.23, Op.82/1 (1827) from his first Kassel period and so on. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find some weaker works from his later years too.

With this in mind, we now examine the response to Spohr's later compositions. Much of the critical comment refers to the later music in general terms and very rarely subjects an individual work to close examination in order to justify the hypothesis of decline. Many of these comments come in general music histories or encyclopedias with little evidence of the authors having studied much of Spohr's music in detail and it would be tedious to cite them all here as Brown's critical biography covers much of this ground. Glenewinkel is an honourable exception to this school of generalised criticism, though his monograph focuses on the chamber music for strings only and so the late orchestral works and chamber music with piano are not studied. He states that from the time of String Quintet No.4, only two works are of real importance, Double Quartet No.4 and the Sextet⁹, though he finds kind things to say about parts of String Quintet No.5, Op.106 (1838) and String Quartet No.32, Op.141 as well as individual movements of other works such as String Quartet No.33, Op.146 (1851) where he considers the slow movement to rank with the best by Spohr from any period. Unfortunately, he is not very complimentary about the remainder of this quartet.

The modern Spohr revival – mainly on CD but also on radio in some countries as well as in concerts at a level below the high-profile international orchestras and ensembles – has included a large proportion of his late works and has given many listeners an opportunity to appreciate them or otherwise. In a CD review of String Quintet No.5 and No.6, the English critic and Elgar editor Robert Anderson says: "the writing is never vacuous, and at no point has there been a trace of the cloying chromatics so often associated with Spohr's name. The performances are exemplary, with ... a sense of enjoyment that drags the music once more into the limelight where it belongs ... there is a warm sense of well-being born of a very proper respect for music of real calibre"¹⁰. Clive Brown has recently grouped Symphony No.7, Op.121 with No.2 and No.5 as Spohr's three best symphonies¹¹. Earlier, he had good things to say about Symphony No.8, Op.137¹² as did the 1999 *Penguin Guide to Compact Discs* where the reviewer thought it was an altogether better proposition than No.7, mentioning the "fine, sombre" slow movement and the "engagingly songful" finale¹³. The *Penguin Guide* also likes the Quartet-Concerto, stating that it is "a consistently engaging work (Spohr's very last concerto), inventive and tuneful – the slow movement is particularly fine – using the players in the solo quartet individually as well as in consort ... this is very much worth trying"¹⁴.

The five piano trios (1841-49) as a group are becoming more and more subject to praise. The *Penguin Guide* says they are "among his freshest, most appealing chamber works, full of attractive ideas and fine craftsmanship"¹⁵. Clive Brown devotes the first half of a chapter to them, also noting their "freshness and inventiveness"¹⁶ while a young Canadian musicological research graduate, Brian Black, wrote to the Spohr Society of Great Britain about the trios: "I am finishing off my doctoral dissertation in musicology on the early string quartets of Schubert. Not only is Spohr's music very interesting and beautifully written, but it also is quite close to Schubert's in certain details of the handling of sonata form. I have been struck above all by some of the wonderful harmonic effects Spohr achieves ... Until recently my view of Spohr was drawn almost entirely from history books where he was treated as a sentimental composer of polished, yet

cloyingly chromatic music. Everything I have looked at and listened to so far has been quite a revelation. The piano trios, particularly the third in A minor, are quite beautiful. I have also been impressed by the string quintets and the symphonies"¹⁷. Dr Martin Wulffhorst, while finding the trios have attractive features, thinks they are less inspired than the later Septet, Op.147 (1853). He does like the Piano Quintet, Op.130¹⁸ as does Hartmut Becker who writes of its "elan and imaginativeness hardly suggesting a 61-year-old composer". Of the Septet, Becker specifically states that the opening movement "already attests to the fact that the high technical standards and solid craftsmanship of Spohr's composing had not declined over the years"¹⁹. He refers to the work reflecting the "originality and energy" of Spohr's best years. Brown writes of the "combination of vigour, charm and exquisite technical skill"²⁰ while Robert Golding notes that "at nearly 70, Spohr's touch was still as sure as ever"²¹. Brown is also enthusiastic about the Piano Sonata²² while the booklet accompanying a recent CD of the work reveals that no less a pianist than Artur Schnabel thought highly of it, as related by his son²³.

Another work Brown enthuses over is the String Quartet No.32, Op.141²⁴ and a professional string quartet which recently looked through a number of Spohr's works from different periods chose this one to perform in a concert, because they were so impressed by it. Another high quality quartet group looking at Spohr for a planned concert, preferred String Quartet No.34, Op.152 – savaged by Glenewinkel as the nadir of Spohr's decline – over earlier works because they felt it had real emotional depth²⁵. From the same period, Spohr's last three violin duos (Opp,148, 150 and 153) were championed many years ago along with his other duos by the redoubtable critic Sir Donald Tovey when he said the medium was "magnificently exploited by Spohr"²⁶. Another fearless critic, Hans Keller, wrote: "Spohr's duos ... are perfect textures, all of them, for which reason we shouldn't have to wait for a listener's request to hear [Op.67/2]. Why indeed don't we hear Spohr's other duos?"²⁷. Spohr's last string quintet, No.7, Op.144 (1850), another work to come under the Glenewinkel hammer, is praised by Dr Bertrand Jacobs: "This unusual piece ... has elicited much enthusiasm among players"²⁸. Even the neglected and unrecorded Concert Overture, Op.126 "in serious style" (1842) has been promoted by Hartmut Becker: "When viewed in terms of developmental history [it] points ahead to the inspired representation of "the tragic" by Brahms in his *Tragic* Overture, Op.81 of 1880"²⁹. We agree with his estimate of its influence³⁰ and class it among his best orchestral works with a beautiful and memorable second subject which ought to make it a favourite piece once it is revived.

Even some of Spohr's more frequently derided works have found their champions. The "Reise Sonata" for violin and piano, Op.96 (1836) is considered by Brown to be the best of his three duos concertantes for this combination, "having a freshness that the others lack; its thematic material is bolder and its contrasts more striking"³¹. John Warrack enjoyed the Violin Concerto No.14, Op.110 "Sonst und jetzt" (1839), saying: "Spohr produces rather a good *Tarantella* and integrates it ingeniously ... with his more lyrical music"³² and the Historical Symphony (1839) was described by the *Penguin Guide* as a "fascinating pastiche" and was "endearing in its respect for the great masters" while the "agreeably frivolous finale ... bursts with energy". The reviewer said the CD was well worth getting³³.

Enough has been surveyed to show that the majority of Spohr's later works have found someone to respond positively to them and it is interesting to note how many of these positive responses date from recent years as well as coming from a wide range of musicologists, scholars, performers, music journalists and informed amateurs. This contrasts strangely with the traditional view of the insipidness of these compositions. The critics in the main pointed to five factors which they felt contributed to Spohr's perceived weaknesses in these later works:

1) Self-repetition: Spohr's reliance on a restricted number of melodic and harmonic mannerisms

2) Spohr's increasing use of chromaticism

3) Formal conservatism: this being contrasted to Beethoven's original approaches to form

4) The use of all-pervasive motivic cells which may produce unity but at the cost of monotony

5) Lack of strong contrasts and absence of "popular" elements

As far as self-repetition goes, this is surely not a crime. If it is, then many baroque composers such as Handel and Vivaldi are also guilty. The point is whether the self-quotation works in its new context and it must surely do so in Spohr's case, otherwise his later works would remain unappreciated. As we have shown above, that is far from the case.

Spohr's use of chromaticism is the harbinger of a continuing 19th century development as the music of Wagner, Reger, Strauss and others demonstrates, before reaching the unceasing chromaticism of Schoenberg's expressionist and serial works.

On the question of form, Spohr's use of procedures with which Haydn and Mozart would have been at home may today be looked on as an asset. Since his 1956 bicentenary Mozart has been considered by more and more listeners to be the greatest composer of all time while Haydn's stature has been continuously rising, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. So modern listeners respond readily to the formal balance and structure of Spohr's music; indeed, this ingredient may have helped greatly in the growing appreciation of his works whereas in the late 19th and early 20th century it was compared unfavourably to what was seen as Beethoven's dynamic and revolutionary approach to form.

Our own time is also trained to appreciate motivically saturated music. A leading proponent of the all-pervasive motivic cell technique was Schoenberg who merged this and his incessant chromaticism to produce his method of serial composition. It is worth pointing out that Schoenberg began to link this to a formal structure which, as in Spohr, returns to Haydn and Mozart, especially in his Wind Quintet and String Quartet No.3. In the Quintet, Schoenberg even has an exposition repeat – just like Spohr! Schoenberg pointed to Brahms as one of his forerunners from whom he learnt important lessons about motivic technique³⁴ and the known influence of Spohr on Brahms therefore cannot be ruled out of a chain extending to Schoenberg. If this seems far-fetched, then listen to the opening of Spohr's Double Quartet No.4 along with Schoenberg's Sextet "Verklärte Nacht" – does the distance seem that far?

The criticism of Spohr's lack of strong contrasts goes back to Moritz Hauptmann who pointed out that Spohr honed his compositions so perfectly that there was no space for the sort of strong contrasts one finds in Beethoven or the "popular" touches of Weber: "I think the want of base metal, of a certain alloy in Spohr's works, is a very real want indeed. When I say base metal, I do not, of course, mean anything despicable; I mean a certain contrast, without which gold is not gold ... just as in his true gold we miss the alloy, so in his full harmonies we miss those empty spaces, those powerful contrasts, which are to be found in all great composers"³⁵. Yet Spohr showed in the finales of the Historical Symphony and the Violin Concerto No.14 (the "jetzt" movement) that he could have written more in this vein had he wished. But had he done so, he would not be Spohr and, for many listeners, something of what attracts them to his music would be missing. As Boccherini wrote to his publisher, Pleyel, when the latter wanted him to write simpler works suitable for amateurs: "I have been writing music for nearly 40 years and I should not be Boccherini if I had written as you advise me to do. In such works it is not possible to follow your advice, that is to say to be simple and brief; for that would mean bidding farewell

to modulations and to the development of given themes etc”³⁶. Hauptmann, for all his criticisms of the later Spohr, recognised this: “It seems to me that nowadays people would like to eliminate from Spohr’s later compositions the very thing that was once so attractive – the very substance of them, musically speaking”³⁷.

In fact, when properly performed according to the composer’s instructions, method and wishes, with dynamic differentiation strongly highlighted, the tempo pushed along to avoid dragging (Spohr was most insistent on this point. In a letter to a conductor about to perform the Fourth Symphony, he emphasised: “that the first allegro should not be dragged” and “the third movement, the march, is easily dragged, so the conductor must continually push it along a little”³⁸), the fast movements taken with drive and the slow movements with a broad cantabile, there are strong enough contrasts in Spohr to satisfy most listeners.

Finally, we would point to the lesson to be learnt from the reception history of Richard Strauss. For a long while, the works from his post-*Rosenkavalier* period until the last years of his “Indian Summer” were criticised for “decline of inspiration”, “self-repetition” and “a routine of composing”. These days, many of Strauss’s works from those years have been successfully revived: *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *Intermezzo*, *Arabella*, *Daphne* and especially *Capriccio*. In Spohr’s case, the Fourth Double Quartet and the Sextet have always been included among his finest creations but we must now hope that his other late works can be treated as sympathetically as Strauss’s and that scholars may be inspired by them to create a new, more positive image of the later Spohr.

Already, in 1991, Edward Pearce had shown the way in an article exploring various Spohr paradoxes³⁹ when he wrote: “Spohr at heart was a late classicist, liking rounded periods, beginnings, middles and ends. Above all, he looked back to and adored Mozart. Yet, another paradox, for all his classicism Spohr emphatically developed. Take the four double quartets ... Numbers 1 and 2, written in 1823 and 1827 respectively, are very pleasing but there is something of serenade, even of high salon music about them ... In the Third and Fourth (1832 and 1847) ... the music is much more interesting. For my taste the Third and Fourth Double Quartets belong right in the repertory, inventive, captivating music not to be called ‘pleasant’ or ‘agreeable’ any more than the Mendelssohn Octet. If a broad public ever gets hold of these two, they will become required and regular companions ... Spohr’s voice was not that of a pleasant, minor composer or even of the super technician he certainly was. My own guess is that a further decade’s exposure of the opus-mountain of the Kassel Konzertmeister will establish a ranking a little below Haydn and Mendelssohn but in their company and of it.”

Notes

1. *Gramophone*, November 1985 in review of Orfeo CD of Spohr songs, Op.103 and Op.154.
2. Hauptmann, Moritz. *The Letters of a Leipzig Cantor*, translated and arranged by A. D. Coleridge (London, 1892), vol.1, page 24. All letters cited in these notes are to Franz Hauser, director of the Munich Conservatoire.
3. Brown, Clive. *Louis Spohr. A Critical Biography* (Cambridge, 1984), page 309.
4. Rossini is perhaps rather a special case as his late works were written after he retired from operatic composition where his reputation had been made.
5. Glenewinkel, Hans. *Spohrs Kammermusik für Streichinstrumente. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Streichquartetts im XIX. Jahrhundert* (diss. Munich, 1912), page 107.
6. Booklet with Orfeo CD C094-841A, Spohr symphonies 6 and 9 (Munich, 1984).
7. Brown, op. cit., especially pages 261-272, 290, 296-299 and 306-316.
8. Brown, op. cit., page 335.
9. Glenewinkel, op. cit., page 125.
10. *Musical Times*, October, 1995.

11. *The New Grove*, second edition (London, 2001), Vol. 24, Spohr entry.
12. Brown, op. cit., page 306-308.
13. *The Penguin Guide to Compact Discs* (1999), page 1371.
14. *Penguin*, op. cit., page 1370.
15. *Penguin*, op. cit., page 1372.
16. Brown, op. cit., page 261-267; also page 296 and page 315-319.
17. Private correspondence of April-May 1996.
18. Review in *Musica* March/April 1992, summarised by Chris Tutt in *Spohr Journal* 19, 1992, page 11.
19. Booklet with CD MDG3040534-2, Spohr Piano Quintet and Septet (Detmold, 1994).
20. Brown, op. cit., page 331.
21. Booklet with CD CRD339, Spohr Piano and Wind Quintet and Septet (London, 1981).
22. Brown, op. cit., page 271.
23. Booklet with CD KASP57591, Spohr Sonata and Rondoletto/Schubert Sonata, D.850 (Irvington, NY, 1998).
24. Brown, op. cit., page 314.
25. Private communications with the author, 1997 and 2001.
26. *Essays in Musical Analysis*. Supplementary Volume (London, 1944).
27. *The Listener*, September 5th, 1985.
28. In his "The Chamber Music of Louis Spohr", *Spohr Journal* 25, 1998, page 28.
29. Booklet with CD MDG3070849-2, Spohr Overture, Op.12, Nonet and Quartet-Concerto (Detmold, 1998, not available until 2001).
30. See the author's article, "The Historical Symphony Revisited with a note on its relationship to the Concert Overture Op.126 'im ernsten Styl' " in *Spohr Journal* 19, 1992, pages 8-10.
31. Brown, op. cit., page 240.
32. *Gramophone*, November 1997 in review of CPO 999403-2, Spohr violin concertos 1, 14, 15.
33. *Penguin*, op. cit. page 1371.
34. Schoenberg's often reprinted essay "Brahms the Progressive" examines this matter.
35. Hauptmann, op. cit., vol.1, page 28.
36. Booklet with CD Capriccio 10452, Boccherini string quintets (Königsdorf, 1993).
37. Hauptmann, op. cit., vol.1, page 185.
38. Spohr's letter, dated Nov. 5th, 1832, translated by Chris Tutt from Horst Heussner: *Die Symphonien Louis Spohrs* (diss, Marburg, 1956), copy kindly provided by the Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft (sitz Kassel).
39. "The Paradox of Red Louis", *Classic CD*, July 1991, page 12.