

GLENEWINKEL ON TWO OF SPOHR'S LATE STRING QUARTETS

translated by Celia Skrine

THE 1912 dissertation by Hans Glenewinkel, *Spohrs Kammermusik für Streichinstrumente. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Streichquartetts im XIX. Jahrhundert* (Munich), is the only comprehensive study of the string quartets. As the quartets Opp.141 and 152 have recently received their first recordings we offer here Glenewinkel's examination of these two works.

It should be explained that Spohr began to number his quartets with the 31st, the A major, Op.132 of 1846, but he erroneously marked it as No.30 and continued to be one out in the numbering of his later quartets too. Hence, in the two works covered here, the numbers in the first published editions reflect Spohr's mistake. We now proceed with the translation of Glenewinkel's text:

String Quartet No.32 in C major, Op.141

First movement, Allegro moderato, 3/4, C major

The flow of the music is charming but undemanding. To make up for the intellectually shallow nature of its main themes, the composer opts to elaborate on intermediary episodes, but their intricate secondary lines and complicated figure-work offer only a poor substitute for depth. The movement does, however, have a more substantial development than the first movement of the previous quartet [Op.132]. In the prettily turned closing section, a variant on the main theme is overlaid with interwoven figures that resemble the silvery threads of a spider's web.

Second movement, Larghetto, 6/8, F major

While never achieving the convincing power of earlier slow movements, this presents a harmonious flow of gentle, serene emotion furnished with many delicate details

Third movement, Scherzo, Allegro, 3/4, C minor

The bolero rhythm, maintained throughout, is reminiscent of a Spanish dance. Each four-bar period is followed by a sharply rhythmical section in which the accent is consistently delayed until the second crotchet. The movement is pervaded by an atmosphere of deep melancholy which is not entirely dispelled by the forced jollity of the transposition of the theme into the major. The Trio (in A flat major) is noticeably weaker than the compelling main section.

Fourth movement, the Finale, Presto, 4/4, C major

Here the ideas are strung together in a carefree, natural sequence. The themes, though insignificant, are pleasing; the main motif proper, which occurs repeatedly, consists of a group of three notes, and is used to introduce the first theme in all four voices successively. The second theme lends a piquant note to the point in the seventh bar where the flow is suddenly slowed down. There is no lack of inventive details: for example, while the first violin is performing a trill on A² at the end of his 10-bar cadenza, the main motif is capriciously tossed around by the other instruments with no regard for their lord and master, in such a way that the closing resolution into G major has to be forced through despite opposition. Technically the movement is charmingly thought out: there is a pleasing moment in the development where a fugato is introduced above the first theme.

General remarks

The lack of intellectual content is particularly apparent as regards invention. In its thematic development this work is more lively than the previous quartet. The writing is predominantly polyphonic.

The autograph, in the Berlin Library, has 23 sheets of which 44 sides are covered, lengthways, with 12 staves each. Title: '31st Quartet, Louis Spohr.' At end: 'Cassel, 7th February 1849'. The catalogue [Spohr's own handwritten one] also specifies February 1849 as the date of composition.

The quartet was published by C. Luckhardt, Kassel, in September or October 1849 and is described as Quartet No.31. In June of the same year Spohr performed this work in Leipzig together with the Double Quartet Op.136, composed two years earlier, in the home of his friends the Vogt family, when on his way to Carlsbad. Moritz Hauptmann, who was present, wrote shortly afterwards that the quartet had pleased him enormously (his letter is dated 1st June), which suggests that the quartet may have been played in Leipzig as early as May.

A detailed appreciation by C. Böhmer appeared in the *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* No.9 (27th February 1850). He praises the first three movements warmly: 'In the matter of modulations Spohr's mastery is seen in all its fullness.' The finale is less to his taste, although, as he says himself, he is unable to pinpoint any reason other than personal impression. 'In any case, the four movements form a very harmonious whole which fully satisfies requirements of overall effect'.

However, a quite different note is struck by a critic in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (Vol.32, 21st May 1850), which at the time, with Brendel as editor, was the organ of the progressive Liszt-Wagner camp and detested all those who were not of like persuasion. As we know from letters of Hans von Bülow, they regarded Spohr too as an arch-reactionary – in other words, an abomination. The piece is signed T.U. This must be Theodor Uhlig, a name which appears in accounts of Wagner's life.

'Spohr's 31st quartet and his 141st work! The main part of our discussion might as well end here.. Who could fail to know, even by the time of this composer's 41st work (let alone 141st), what lay in store? Shall we now enumerate the usual features? They are all present here again: passage-work in the first violin, accompanying figures in the cello, tortuous chromatics in all four voices, characteristic melodic turns, harmonic sequences and rhythmic figures, individual quirks of form and structure, none of it needing any further description in order to be fully comprehended? Any critique that attempts to bring its writer's inmost convictions into line with the reverence in which a composer of Spohr's eminence is held must leave it to the reader to provide the answer. We have no quarrel with anyone who has enjoyed the present quartet, and unquestionably its composer must still be able to count string players among his following, otherwise his indefatigability in composing would be incomprehensible. We admit, however, that the gloom that overcame us as the work was being played had nothing to do with the melancholy effect that the music is intended to have on tender sensibilities. Only the first so-called idea of the first movement can lay claim to innovation; all the rest is totally devoid of novelty and freshness. The first movement is the best-rounded and most agreeable of the longer movements; the second movement reveals the weakness of Spohr's style most clearly and therefore seems the stalest. The Scherzo or at least its short main section would have a certain effectiveness were the handling of the main motif not constantly and immediately interrupted by tortuous chromaticisms. The short Trio of the Scherzo makes a pleasing whole, whereas the final movement is insignificant in the extreme.'

String Quartet No.34 in E flat major, Op.152

First movement, Adagio-Allegro, 4/4, E flat major

The questioning main motif which opens the introduction appears in varying and sometimes

recherché harmonic guises. Two forms have a modernity which makes them of particular interest:

1. *auf dem D.*

2. *auf dem G.*

The first is interesting because of the emphasis on the augmented triad in combination with the steps of a minor second (cf the 'Herzeleide' motif in *Parsifal*). The second displays an audacity unprecedented in Spohr where the jarring discord C D B A flat F remains unresolved. This feature occurs again in the same form in the Allegro, which is for the greater part very unsatisfactory in construction. The four notes of the introductory main motif provide the start of the first theme, a well-worn phrase heard above florid, mannered harmonies; the second is derived from a more attractive variant of the first. The movement is rich in sickly, contrived harmonic sequences. As regards form, a notable feature is the appearance of a completely new, fugue-like theme in the development section.

Second movement, *Larghetto con moto*, 3/4, A flat major

Our assessment of this movement cannot but be even more negative: its conception lacks charm, and its execution is made wearisome by constant repetitions, soporifically exaggerated chromaticism, and a total lack of contrast and clarity. The music gives an impression of extravagant, monotonous, maudlin self-pity. The theme is borrowed from the first movement of the A flat major quartet [Op.84, No.2].

Third movement, *Menuetto*, 3/4, E flat major

This is more lively, first and foremost because of rhythmic subtleties: at one point a two-bar motif is forced into the basic triple rhythm; from then on the main feature is a contest based on bizarre effects, between a rocking, accompanying figure and the melody itself as to which has the greater melodic significance. This creates a musical atmosphere which is restless yet also

attractive. The Trio (in A flat) has none of the lilt of the minuet section: it contains a folksong-like melody, and in order to execute it effectively the player must be expert at clean double-stopping. The reappearance of the theme into the minor corresponds almost exactly with a passage in the Scherzo of Op.4, No.2.

Fourth movement, the Finale, Allegro, 2/2, E flat major

This is the most insignificant of all the movements. The first theme is remarkable for its shallowness and the piece proceeds at length in the same vein. The second theme is a little spicier but the main flavour is fatally trivial. As regards form, a point to mention is the fact that the Finale has a new idea in its development which is treated as a fugal theme, then another new and independent idea appears in the coda. This, the last of Spohr's published quartets, ends symbolically with one of his most frequent concluding devices, a minor-key plagal cadence.

General remarks

In the lavish, richly perfumed garland of Spohr quartets, this last petal is rust-coloured and spotty. What becomes evident is a loss of power: inspiration is supplanted by competent hack-work as Spohr struggles desperately but in vain to create something new. The most enjoyable movement is the Minuet. Both styles are at work here: the middle movements are written in chamber music style whereas in the outer movements the first violin is predominant.

The quartet was written in June and July of 1855 and was published in June 1856 by Siegel of Leipzig as Quartet No.33. According to the title page the publisher also brought out an arrangement for piano duo by Th. Herbert. According to a letter from Spohr to Moritz Hauptmann dated 5th November 1854 it appears that he intended to produce it that same year. 'Now that I am almost ready with it (the Fiorillo Etudes) I am keen to busy myself again with my own works. As our quartet meetings begin again in the next few weeks, I am keen to write another quartet or quintet'

The only known public response to it is a comment from Vienna by Fr. Winter, who wrote to Spohr: 'How delightful and beautiful this, your latest creation, is: as at all the earlier quartet evenings, it filled us with admiration and gratitude once again! How dearly I would like to go into a detailed description of each individual movement – the charming first movement, the richly harmonic and moving Adagio and the jaunty, sparkling Scherzo with its wonderful Trio....' [A footnote by Glenewinkel comments that Winter must have been one of Spohr's most ardent admirers.]

Footnote by Keith Warsop

Glenewinkel's evaluation of the quartets Opp.141 and 152 has to be seen in the context of his overall thesis; that from about 1834 Spohr's creativity suffered a long, slow decline. Therefore, he was more predisposed to seek out the weaknesses in the late works and underplay their positive points, so making them fit more readily into his hypothesis of Spohr's decline. It would appear from Glenewinkel's comments that certain stylistic developments in these works were not to his taste and so encouraged him in his harsh verdict. However, it will soon be possible for listeners to judge for themselves whether or not he was correct, with the forthcoming release of the first recordings of these quartets.