

# SPOHR AND THE FINAL PERIOD

by Keith Warsop

THE well-known division of Beethoven's oeuvre into three creative periods, early, middle and late, has stimulated musical scholars to carry out a similar exercise for other composers. In the case of Spohr, the detailed examination of his chamber music for strings by Hans Glenewinkel included a first attempt at a three-period division of his compositions for this medium. [GLENWINKEL 1912, pp.117-119]

It should be noted that Glenewinkel ignored the years in which Spohr did not write any string chamber music such as his early period in Brunswick before 1805, 1816 and 1839-1844. Also, at the time when Glenewinkel was writing it had not been revealed that Spohr began work on his first string quartet in 1804 in Brunswick but it was thought that it dated from 1807-1808.

Therefore Glenewinkel considered the first period to cover the Gotha years of 1807 and 1808. When it came to the second period, there were entirely logical grounds for commencing it in 1812, aside from Spohr's move from Gotha to Vienna towards the end of that year, as Spohr said that it was about this time that he became aware that a composer should strive to be original in both form and content, and accordingly eliminated from his style direct reliance on Mozartian prototypes. [SPOHR 1865, p.130]

The second period in Glenewinkel's survey covered the Vienna and Frankfurt appointments as well as the years of travel and closed with Spohr's move to Kassel in 1822. Again, this is a well-defined period which included the development of Spohr's style towards a more romantically inflected outlook.

Now, however, Glenewinkel faced a problem. If Spohr was to be allocated the traditional three periods, the whole of his remaining years in Kassel from 1822 to his death in 1859 would have to serve for the third one and some important stylistic developments would be spread over a single 37-year span. This also ran counter to Glenewinkel's own thesis of the long, slow decline of Spohr's inspiration from about the time of the death of his first wife, Dorette, in 1834.

Glenewinkel solved this conundrum in a simple but effective way. He coolly divided the final period into two parts and to some degree also did this with the second period of 1812-1822. So he ended up with what were really five periods and his original formulation of three merely paid lip service to the traditional triple division.

For the second period, he allocated the Viennese years of 1812-1815 to the first half while the remaining years of 1817-1822 covered the second half and in the case of the third period, he split it between 1823-1838 and 1845-1857. He therefore listed his five periods as: 1) 1807-1808; 2) 1812-1815; 3) 1817-1822; 4) 1823-1838; 5) 1845-1857.

However, when Glenewinkel came to analyse the individual works he found that, in his view, the chamber works of 1834-1838 shared many characteristics with those of the final years of 1845-1857. If Glenewinkel had taken his process to its logical conclusion he would have divided the Kassel years into 1823-1833 and 1834-1857 but no doubt he was influenced by the large gap of 1839-1844 in which Spohr wrote no string chamber music.

In fact, Glenewinkel's theory of the long, slow decline of Spohr's creativity after about 1834 prevented him from looking closely at an important development in Spohr's later music. It is our contention which we hope to demonstrate here that after 1851 Spohr's compositions show such a significant development that a 'final period' can be discerned in his oeuvre which covers the latter part of Glenewinkel's fifth period. Therefore, we would divide the Kassel years into three

periods: 1) 1823-1833; 2) 1834-1851; 3) 1852-1857.

The 33rd string quartet (G major, Op.146), completed in December 1851 fits in with the overall stylistic ambience of the post-1833 works. Many of Spohr's compositions from this period have their individual beauties, inspirations and excellences but one could argue that his ideal at this period remained fairly stable and quite a number of these works are formally conservative (the obvious exceptions being the programme symphonies along with the Sextet). Instead the interest is placed elsewhere; tonal relationships, harmonies and especially the use of chromaticism. He seems also to have been compelled to return again and again to tackling similar problems in search of further possibilities in these areas. One example: the finales which start with a short motif repeated successively on each instrument (4th Double Quartet, 32nd and 33rd string quartets).

We could point to Beethoven examining different treatments of an identical motif in some of his late string quartets or Bruckner appearing to have a symphonic ideal which spurred him on to many attempts at a more perfect realisation in order to show that Spohr is not alone in this sort of 'artistic obsession'.

In the post-1851 works Spohr has cast off such matters and seems to be looking at a wider variety of creative endeavour. The reason for this change may be found in the commission he received early in 1852. In England, Queen Victoria and her consort, Prince Albert, had requested a performance of Spohr's *Faust* at the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden. Apart from the German libretto having to be translated into Italian, it also meant that the original spoken dialogue in the German singspiel tradition would have to be set to music in order to fall into line with the rules for works staged at the Royal Italian Opera House.

Accordingly, Frederick Gye, the director of the Royal Italian Opera, visited Kassel at the beginning of 1852 to request the revision. At first Spohr declined but eventually gave way to further pressure. In a letter to his friend and former colleague Moritz Hauptmann, Spohr described how he had been carried back 40 years as he worked absorbingly on the project: 'This work has given me great pleasure and agreeably occupied me for a period of three months, during which I have been, as it were, completely transported back to the happy days of my youth in Vienna. At first with the assistance of my wife I had to alter the dialogue scenes in such a manner as to fit them for composition. In doing this I have tried to give them more interest than they previously possessed and to shorten those things which from the start had displeased me at many performances I had seen of this opera. I think and hope that I have succeeded in both. I then had to restore myself, as it were, to the same mood and style in which I wrote *Faust*, and I hope that I have succeeded in this too and that no one will observe a difference of style between the old and the new.' [English translation in: BROWN 1984, p.324]

This was not all as Spohr travelled to London in the summer of 1852 to conduct the première of the revised version. While there he heard the 16-year-old English violinist John Carrodus perform his Seventh Violin Concerto, also a Vienna composition of 1814. In addition, Carrodus and his teacher, Bernhard Molique, played for Spohr one of his violin duos of 1816, the D minor, Op.39, No.1, as well as the G minor, Op.67, No.3, of 1824.

When Spohr returned home, family life was disrupted for a while in October by the death of his father-in-law and close friend, Wilhelm Pfeiffer, consequently he was unable to settle down to his usual autumn compositional routine. Then, in the summer of 1853, he returned to London to conduct his opera *Jessonda* at the Royal Italian Opera though, because of production delays, he had to return to Kassel before it could be put on. He was also booked to conduct concerts for the New Philharmonic Society.

On arrival in London he was immediately taken to a concert which included an excellent

performance of his Nonet, another work of his Vienna period. During what was his last stay in England he heard further performances of some of his violin duos, this time played by the teenage brothers, Alfred and Henry Holmes, and they so impressed Spohr that he decided to compose some new duos especially for them.

These close encounters with his young self seem to have sparked in Spohr the desire to regain something of this youthful exuberance in his current works, a feeling perhaps also fuelled by an ever-increasing and strong nostalgia for the happy years which now lay so far in the past.

This becomes clearly evident in the first substantial composition dating from after his return home in 1853, the Septet in A minor, Op.147. It was the first time that Spohr had called for wind instruments in chamber music for 33 years and perhaps his nostalgia had something to do with the fact that he used exactly the same wind forces as appeared in his Piano and Wind Quintet in C minor, Op.52, composed in 1820.

This had been written for his first wife, Dorette, at the time when health problems caused her to give up playing the harp and switch to the piano. Part of Spohr's remembrance of happy times long past was connected to his love for Dorette and their years together so it is not surprising that the psychological return to the period of *Faust* became linked in his mind to thoughts of his life with Dorette.

Of course, Spohr did not throw off completely his later style but imported into it some of the qualities of his earlier works. More than one commentator has noted the freshness of inspiration which emanates from the Septet. There is a 'Nonettish' liveliness about parts of it; the woodwind passages marked *scherzando* in the first movement (from Letter B and then leading up to the double bar); the *Scherzo's* first *Trio* which features a solo clarinet reminiscent of Hermstedt compositions; and the closing stages of the finale's exposition. The warmly beautiful second subject of this finale too recalls the romantic feeling of the Octet without in any way being a recycling of anything found there.

Spohr then turned to his next task, the violin duos he planned to write for Alfred and Henry Holmes. The very fact that he returned to the medium in which he had set the benchmark must have brought about the feeling that he was going back to his roots. His earlier duos dated from 1802-1805 (Op.3); 1807 (Op.9); 1816 (Op.39); and 1824 (Op.67) so that his own models excluded anything from after 1824.

In one definite respect, though, Spohr became an innovator. All of his earlier duos had been in two or three movements, often in compressed sonata forms but now he expanded the dimensions of the violin duo to that of the string quartet with four movements and a full sonata form with repeats.

Thus, he was setting himself the tremendous challenge of avoiding monotony with his two identical instruments over a much longer spell than in his earlier duos. These three late works show that he succeeded admirably and the variety he was able to introduce owed a lot to the elements in the earlier duos which he used and developed.

The first duo, in F major, Op.148, which was completed in March 1854, has much of the melodic richness of the Septet. The second subject of the first movement is another gem while the slow movement displays a gentle and touching lyricism. One of Spohr's happiest periods was that spent in Switzerland in 1816 preparatory to his Italian journey, and it was while he was there that he wrote his Op.39 duos. Just as the second of these featured a canonic *Menuetto*, so in Op.148 we find a canonic *Scherzo*. Again, the youthful example acts as an inspiration; there is no duplication of material here. In contrast, the *Trio* brings another warm melody while the finale alternates between vitality and lyricism.

The next duo, in D major, Op.150, which was ready in December 1854, is also indebted to the

fructifying effects of earlier examples. There is a quirky rhythmic kick in the opening theme and this is also imported into the second subject which it dominates. Spohr's level of invention in the transitional sections of passage-work is also working at full throttle and this opening *Allegro* is altogether a most satisfying movement.

In the *Larghetto* Spohr again recalls a procedure from Op.39 where the *Adagio* in the first work of that set contrasted a gravely lyrical melody with a more rhythmically agitated section. In Op.150 he makes the contrast more manifest by switching the time signature from 2/4 to 12/16. The *Menuetto*, though, is completely original. It makes much use of grace notes and heralds a series of inspired minuets in Spohr's last works which owe little to anything he had done earlier.

The *Rondo* finale begins with a purely violinistic idea; slurred groups of semi-quavers with grace notes are built up sequentially to make the theme. The first episode features slashing chords and a theme which has slightly 'Octettish' connotations. Another episode changes the basic 2/4 rhythm to 6/8; just as 2/4 was alternated in the *Larghetto* with a compound time signature, so the same procedure is adopted here. Surprisingly, it is this 6/8 material which has the last word.

Spohr now decided to write a new string quartet with which to open his annual winter series of chamber music evenings which he held with his circle of family and friends in Kassel and so he composed his 34th quartet in E flat major, Op.152, in June and July 1855. By this time the revolutionary enthusiasm of 1848 in which Spohr had shared had been suppressed and in Kassel the ruling Prince was running his state in his old authoritarian way.

Whether this situation affected Spohr's approach to the music of this quartet cannot, of course, be known but it displays less of the freshness of his earlier style and indeed carries an undertow of sadness. Here, Spohr sets the mood right at the start by prefacing the first movement with a slow introduction.

The opening four-note figure plays a major role in the progress of the whole movement as it provides the launching pad for both first and second subjects. Glenewinkel points out that at one stage it displays an audacity unprecedented in Spohr where, over syncopations in the cello, a jarring dissonance remains unresolved. This feature returns in the same form in the *Allegro* in which Spohr replaces a conventional development with a fugato. Syncopation is an important unsettling factor right up to the last bars.

In the A flat major *Larghetto con moto* the composer is unable to shake off the atmosphere of melancholy and syncopations also invade the sweetly lyrical opening theme. Complex inner chromaticisms prevent the music from soaring free above care in the contrasting section dominated by sextuplet figures.

The *Menuetto* in E flat major provides a strong contrast in which the opening dotted rocking accompanying motif contends with the main theme for melodic prominence to produce what Glenewinkel describes as a bizarrely restless yet attractive effect. The *Trio* in A flat major is notable for a folksong-like melody which the first violin has to execute mainly in testing double-stops. This theme returns briefly to end the movement.

For the finale Spohr attempts to bring back the lively and fresher mood he had recaptured in his other recent works and finds a lighter, even frivolous, tone. The second subject, a variant of the first, includes some neat interplay between the two violinists. The first subject is built rather like the one in the finale of the duo Op.150, here through slurred groups of quavers with grace notes.

This theme starts the development but Spohr then springs a surprise – a completely new theme begins a fugato under which the cello eventually repeats the first four notes of the movement's opening motif. After the recapitulation there is a brief reference to the fugato material along with

the cello's four-note signal and the quartet concludes with a diminuendo to a minor key plagal cadence.

The quartet completed, Spohr returned to the unfinished business of the violin duos and completed the third and final one, in C major, Op.153, in autumn 1855. The first movement is notable for its 12/8 time signature and also for the relative simplicity of its material, perhaps a sign that Spohr was already thinking back to the tighter proportions of his Gotha works from 50 years earlier, an ideal which he was to pursue more thoroughly in his very last large-scale compositions. The theme of the *Andante* also partakes of this greater simplicity and indeed could almost be headed *Romanza* except for the fact that the movement's continuation goes on to something more substantial than that.

It is noticeable that after the great *Adagio molto* of the 33rd quartet of 1851, none of Spohr's works has a movement in a really slow tempo:

Septet in A minor, Op.147: *Pastorale: Larghetto*;  
Violin Duo No.12 in F major, Op.148: *Andante con moto*;  
Violin Duo No.13 in D major, Op.150: *Larghetto*;  
String Quartet No.34 in E flat major, Op.152: *Larghetto con moto*;  
Violin Duo No.14 in C major, Op.153: *Andante*;  
String Quartet No.35 in E flat major, Op.155: *Andantino*;  
Symphony No.10 in E flat major, Op.156: *Larghetto*;  
String Quartet No.36 in G minor, Op.157: *Larghetto*.

This fact is perhaps a pointer to Spohr's search for greater simplicity in his music, a development which is certainly confirmed by the last three major unpublished compositions.

Returning to the Op.153 duo, there is another highly original and inspired *Menuetto* following which Spohr's attempts to rekindle the inspiration of his earlier years bear fruit again in the closing *Rondo* where the perky theme recalls the composer of the violin concertos. There is little here of 'the tired old man' routinely repeating well-worn mannerisms ad nauseam and the powerful fortissimo conclusion hammers home the point. The mood of the Op.152 quartet has been laid to rest with a vengeance.

At the close of the summer of the following year, 1856, Spohr wrote his 35th string quartet in E flat major, Op.155. According to the chapters added by his family to the composer's Autobiography which cover his final few years 'this new composition was considered extremely fresh and charming by both performers and listeners, yet he himself was so little satisfied with it that, after repeated alterations which were rejected as soon as made, he laid aside the whole quartet as a failure.' A year later, in 1857, he composed a completely different quartet which also underwent revision but again the composer was so dissatisfied with it that he told his wife that neither of the two works should at any time be made public. [SPOHR 1865, p.322]

Despite the composer's misgivings, there are good reasons why Spohr's embargo should be broken. As far back as 1912, Glenewinkel, for his dissertation; not only studied each of the 36 quartets, he also played through them all and in the light of this experience stated: 'The quartet Op.155 possesses so many merits in its transparency and more natural language that, in my opinion, it surpasses its predecessor in overall merit.'

He considered Op.157 to be less successful in general but added: 'It is surely no mark of disrespect to disregard his wishes concerning it, especially as these quartets represent a new phase and their quality is equal, if not superior, to that of his other late quartets.' Later performers have also found the quartets to be pleasant and enjoyable though it must be emphasised that

neither can be claimed as a 'lost masterpiece'.

Shortly before composing Op.155, Spohr had expressed a wish to write a quartet which returned to the classical ideals of Haydn and Mozart. This is the new phase mentioned by Glenewinkel but the quartet is not a mere neo-classical pastiche as Spohr retains many features of his own individual style, especially in harmony. In terms of structure and texture, however, Spohr does come close to his classical model. The principle of the equal weighting of all four instruments is adhered to and not a single virtuosic flourish is to be found.

The original version of this work was in G minor and opened with a syncopated theme; the second movement was a *Scherzo* marked *Allegro moderato*; then came an *Andantino* in B flat major and finally an *Allegro* in G major. For his revision, Spohr wrote a new E flat major motif with which to open the first movement and the original syncopated theme became a drastically shortened bridge to the second subject.

The main argument of the movement is formed by a constant rivalry between the restless syncopated theme and the firm rhythm of the second subject which dominates the development section. The new first subject is briefly alluded to in the recapitulation and in the coda but the work's original key of G minor makes its presence felt throughout and considerably disturbs the tonal unity. Perhaps it was the problem of reconciling the tonalities of E flat major and G minor which ultimately caused Spohr to shelve the work.

The new version continues with the quartet's original third movement now in second place, still in B flat major and containing the new superscription *Romanza*. Glenewinkel suggests that its 'touchingly simple tune has a gentle charm and miraculous serenity.' The changes from the first version are here of a secondary nature. The *Scherzo* is now placed third and its title changed to *Menuetto* with the tempo *Moderato*; its character anyway places it on the borderline between the two designations. It retains its original key of G major and again revisions are not very extensive.

The finale is transposed to E flat major, its original *Allegro* tempo is now qualified as *Allegro non troppo* and in this movement Spohr's revisions are more thorough. The material is the same but noticeably differently arranged. Glenewinkel sums up the finale like this: 'The work on the motifs of the theme (sequence, transpositions, strettos and imitations) takes up the whole movement; it is done with such mastery that the listener never tires of it, and an impression of freshness remains.'

In this quartet, Spohr again looked to earlier works for inspiration. The new opening theme of the work has close affinities with the one which starts his Op.33/1 string quintet composed in Vienna in 1814 while the march-like second subject resembles one in his C major quartet, Op.45/1 which dates from 1818. But these themes are combined with original material such as the syncopated motif which formed the opening subject of the first version and fresh ideas also feature in the whole of the *Romanza* slow movement as well as in the classically styled *Menuetto*. So there is no great resemblance here with earlier works except for the freshness and tight proportions which return to those of the early Gotha quartets, Opp. 4 and 15.

The revisions to Op.157 were less far-reaching than those to its predecessor. The opening G minor theme possesses a strong character and is immediately developed, mainly by imitation. This *Allegro* is noteworthy, too, for its persistent syncopation and Spohr experiments with a combined development and reprise of the first subject group. The thematic material is recapitulated but the harmonic substance is developed, a treatment referred to by Glenewinkel as a 'romantic development' because it was preferred by romantic composers from Schubert to Bruckner in which the exposition thematic material is not dissected as is common with the classical composers but is substantially unaltered though transposed to other keys.

The harmonic reprise starts with the entry of the second subject in the tonic major but Spohr then appends a complete repeat of the first subject section in its original G minor setting and he must have later felt that this disturbed the balance of the movement so that it fell below his severe formal standards. This may have led him to discard the work.

Glenewinkel rates the E flat major *Larghetto* very highly indeed: 'The movement is masterly as regards both the content and form, easily superior to most of the slow movements of Spohr's later period.' He especially points to 'a beautiful, dreamy episode which sounds almost like a pre-echo of Grieg.' He notes the resemblance of the main theme to that of the slow movement of the A major quartet, Op.93 (the sixth and last *quatuor brillant*), composed in 1835, but considers that Spohr's treatment is better here. So again a new look at earlier ideas produces enhanced inspiration.

A vigorous *Menuetto* makes a feature of grace notes rather like the one in the duo, Op.150, while in the *Trio, un poco più moderato*, a lyrical theme is accompanied by cello pizzicati.

The finale, *Allegro molto*, keeps up the rhythm of the main theme without a break throughout, constantly passing from instrument to instrument. Even when the restless motion is interrupted by the broader sweep of the second theme, the rhythm is continued on the viola. At the end, the music winds down to a *pianissimo* conclusion, a gentle close to Spohr's lifetime devotion to chamber music.

Earlier in 1857, before writing this quartet, Spohr completed his Tenth Symphony in E flat major, Op.156, but, as with the quartets he was dissatisfied and left instructions that it was never to be played. However, at Carnegie Hall, New York, on Sunday March 22, 1998, Eugene Minor conducted the Bergen Youth Orchestra in its world première and the opinion appeared to be that, like the last two quartets, it offered much enjoyment even though it was not a great masterpiece. Again, Spohr was inspired by elements from the style of his earlier period; this time one can discern the lively, ceremonial mood of the Second Clarinet Concerto as well as the Third and Fourth symphonies.

But again, Spohr's striving for the tautness of construction of Haydn and Mozart meant it was not a case of his merely recycling old material. Instead, these influences generated something new; perhaps the start of a 'neo-classical' period years before that label was applied to some early twentieth-century composers. It is a pity that Spohr's physical decline over his last couple of years prevented him from developing the style of these final works into some great composition which could be looked on as his 'summing up'.

Nevertheless, there is sufficient distinction in Spohr's post-1852 works as well as a stylistic move away from those dating from the 1840s for this 'final period' to be considered as a definite element in his career involving important developments which must be taken into account when surveying his music as a whole.

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