

SPOHR AND THE QUATUOR BRILLANT

by Keith Warsop

AMONG Spohr's 36 string quartets are six which he published under the title *quatuor brillant*. They differ significantly in a number of aspects from Spohr's regular or "true" quartets as the composer himself pointed out in his *Violin School*: "A new kind of quartets has been lately introduced in which the first violin has the solo parts and the other instruments merely an accompaniment. To distinguish them from the regular quartet, they are called solo quartets (*quatuors brillants*)."

There are three major ways in which Spohr's six *quatuors brillants* differ from his other 30 quartets:

1. Texture

As Spohr states in his *Violin School*, in a *quatuor brillant* "the other instruments [have] merely an accompaniment." In Spohr's "true" quartets, no matter how difficult the first violin part is, the other three instruments play an important role in the progress of the music.

2. Form

The *quatuors brillants* are in three movements which, in general, resemble the concerto, without a minuet or scherzo. The opening movement is often in a broad tempo such as *Allegro moderato*; then comes a central slow movement, usually *Adagio*, which is like an operatic aria; then the finale follows rondo form, frequently in *Allegretto* tempo on the pattern of the finales in Spohr's own concertos.

There can be a slight variation from this format; in Op.43 the finale is marked *Tempo di Minuetto*; the finale of Op.83 is *Alla Polacca* (presumably *Allegretto*); and Op.93 starts with a short slow introduction prefacing the *Allegro* first movement.

3. Function

Whereas Spohr's "true" quartets were composed for the central classical quartet repertoire, for performance in chamber music concerts, the *quatuors brillants* were designed for a more public arena.

In Gotha, Spohr was diffident about bringing forward his first "true" quartets, Op.4 and Op.15, but he had no qualms with Op.11, his first *quatuor brillant*. His Op.29 quartets in Vienna, Op.45 in Frankfurt, Op.58 in Dresden and the later ones in Kassel were written for inclusion in concerts alongside quartets by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and contemporaries such as Andreas Romberg, Fesca, Onslow and others.

But, while Spohr did play his *quatuors brillants* in these concerts, he took them with him on concert tours and performed them in programmes which also featured vocal and orchestral items.

Take Op.43, for example, his second *quatuor brillant*, composed in Italy and Switzerland in 1817. Spohr featured the work on his concert tour that year in Switzerland, Germany and Holland.

When he came to London in 1820 he included it on March 2 in the second concert of the Philharmonic Society with whom he had been contracted to appear as composer, soloist and orchestral violinist. It is interesting to see the context in which the quartet was programmed:

FIRST HALF

Symphony No.95 in C minor	Haydn
Aria: "Arder mai"	Mozart
Piano Concerto	Mozart
Aria: "Dolce pietoso Amore"	Garcia
Overture: Egmont	Beethoven

SECOND HALF

Symphony No.3 in E♭ major, Op.90 .	Ries
Aria: "Guardam, e in questo"	Zingarelli
Quatuor brillant in E major, Op.43 ...	Spohr
Overture: Les Deux Journées	Cherubini

At the Philharmonic Society's sixth concert on May 22, Spohr played another of his quartets. We can identify Op.43 in the second concert from Spohr's letter to his Frankfurt friend, Wilhelm Speyer, and his comments in his Autobiography, but we do not know which quartet was played in the sixth concert. We can rule out Op.43 otherwise the programme would have stated "repeated by popular request" so the most likely candidate is his third *quatuor brillant*, Op.61 in B minor which he had composed in the summer of 1819 in readiness for the resumption of his touring career following his resignation from his Frankfurt post.

Spohr wrote his sixth and last *quatuor brillant*, Op.93 in A major, in October 1835 and he played this on various concert tours which shows that he still saw these works as having a different function from his "true" quartets. In the Violin School he explained that such quartets "are intended to give the solo player an opportunity to display his musical talent in small circles." He also demanded a distinction between the style of performance of a *quatuor brillant* and a regular quartet. Of the former, he said: "Their style of delivery may be classed with concerto pieces. All remarks on the manner of playing the concerto are applicable to these and similar solo pieces with accompaniment of three or four instruments (as variations, potpourris, etc.) with only this restriction, that in a smaller space and with a weaker accompaniment the tone of the instrument is not to be extracted with the greatest force. All roughness, when the performance is close to the audience, should be carefully avoided." No doubt this last point could be jettisoned in a larger hall such as a Philharmonic Society concert.

In contrast the instructions for standard quartets are completely different: "In such a composition it is not intended that one instrument should exclusively predominate but that each should enter into the spirit of the composer and delineate it accordingly. The power of tone on the first violin and the manner of playing must be in keeping with the rest and where it is not the principal it should remain subordinate. As the style of delivery should always proceed from the idea and spirit of the composition it is required of the solo player in the quartet to lay aside his peculiar manner of solo playing and accommodate himself to the character of the music. Until he be capable of this, he cannot discern the character of the separate parts of the quartet and give proper effect to the variety of style displayed in classical compositions."

Spohr goes on to say: "This will convince the student how much is required for perfect quartet playing and that perhaps less mechanical skill is called for than in a concerto, yet it demands more of refined sentiment, taste and knowledge. The combination of these qualifications will perfect the quartet player and nothing is more calculated to obtain it than diligently playing those compositions. No opportunity ought therefore to be lost of joining a good quartet party."

He suggests that "the student should commence with the second violin and learn the difficult art of accompaniment. This consists in the facility of agreeing with the first violin as closely as

possible, such as the power of tone, the trifling changes of tone, strictly adhering to the prescribed bowings, slurs, light and shade, without however the *f* becoming shrill or conspicuous, unless expressly marked." Later he emphasises that the performer must "remember that the intention of the regular quartet is to display the idea of the author rather than the talent of the violinist. When a peculiar character of a musical idea is interwoven with other parts, the bowings necessary to portray it cannot voluntarily be changed, even supposing the performer knew how to change them for more convenient or more striking modes of expression. The applications of other modes used in the solo require in the quartet great caution to prevent an interruption in the ensemble and destroy the meaning of the composer."

From this we can see that in Spohr's own "true" quartets, any difficult passages for the first violin are intended as part of "the idea and spirit" of the composer and not simply as solo display. In other words, violin display in Spohr's quartets is part of the overall concept and must not be allowed to overstep its proper boundaries. In contrast, his *quatuors brillants* are definitely meant to show off the talents of the soloist.

Spohr's first *quatuor brillant*, Op.11 in D minor, dates from 1806 and, as Spohr stated in a letter to his publisher, was specifically modelled on those of Rode: "1 Quartett für die 1ste Violine im *genre* der Rodischen." The focus throughout remains totally on the solo violin and, as Martin Wulforth has pointed out, Spohr fails to compensate for either the absence of the orchestra and so lacks the solo-tutti contrast, or lack of variety of texture, a feature he was to put right to a greater degree in his later *quatuors brillants*. Nevertheless, Op.11 makes an attractive impression, thanks to the quality of the thematic material, the drive in the outer movements and the lyrical beauty of the *Adagio*.

Some of the deficiencies of Op.11 were rectified in Spohr's next *quatuor brillant*, Op.43 in E major, a work we have already mentioned above. Here, the overall ensemble sound is richer than in Op.11 and the other three instruments have less obviously "accompanimental" material, though still leaving the limelight to the soloist. Whereas, in Op.11, the soloist filled in the gaps between the themes mainly with brilliant passagework, here Spohr provides more contrast in the solo violin part itself. While the violin has its share of bravura figuration, much of the time it concentrates on embellishing the sweetly lyrical melodies. In the *Adagio* there is hardly any passagework "stitched in"; instead, all is devoted to enhancing and ornamenting the thematic material. The minuet finale also offers an alternative to the usual rondo closing movement. It is far removed from the classical minuet model as its mazurka-like melody is a definite proto-romantic touch, while energetic sforzandos and syncopations enliven the proceedings and provide further variety.

With the third *quatuor brillant*, Op.61 in B minor, Spohr moves closer to the model of his Op.11, ignoring many of the subtleties of Op.43. The level of virtuosity involved reaches a new plane though there is also more interest centred on rich harmonic procedures. One innovation is the introduction in the first movement of a special trilling motif which remains the property of the accompanying trio, especially the cello. During the *Adagio* the accompaniment becomes richer with a more varied figuration though the finale is less inventive in this respect.

Although the *quatuors brillants* may be considered the chamber music equivalent of the violin concerto, in one particular they resemble their "true" quartet counterparts. So far Spohr had adhered to the standard first movement sonata form of his classical quartet heritage with a repeated exposition, a formula which, in the *quatuor brillant*, produced a long stretch of music twice over with its dominating solo violin part.

However, in his fourth *quatuor brillant*, Op.68 in A major, which he wrote in Kassel in November 1823, Spohr addressed this problem though he did not follow the obvious path of

eliminating the exposition repeat, something he had recently done in two of his regular quartets, Op.45, No.3 of 1818 and Op.58, No.3 of 1822. Instead, he adopted the plan of some of his violin concertos by omitting the first subject from the recapitulation and jumping to the second subject at that point. He also continued with the idea he introduced in the first movement of Op.61 by giving the subsidiary parts their own exclusive motif. Here it heralds the arrival of the second subject and then accompanies it. Finally, Spohr turns away from the brilliant endings he used previously and writes a quiet and lyrical coda which allows the soloist right at the end to appropriate the motif which so far has been the sole property of the other three instruments.

The *Larghetto* is a typical Spohr 6/8 lyrical slow movement but extremely beautiful while the final Rondo is one of Spohr's catchiest. Op.68 is a warm work, rich in melody and one can understand why Hans Glenewinkel, in his 1912 study of Spohr's chamber music for strings, found that, of all the *quatuors brillants*, this is the one which has most attractions for a modern audience.

With the fifth *quatuor brillant*, Op.83 in E \flat major, written in August 1829, Spohr seems almost to be preparing for work on his Violin School which he began soon afterwards. The soloist undertakes the complete gamut of violin technique with a wide range of bowings, figurations, double stopping, ornamentation, staccato and legato control, cantabile expressiveness and so on. Again, the first movement follows the example of Op.68 by using condensed sonata form which omits the first subject from the recapitulation. In the *Adagio*, the accompanying trio have far more to do than usual as they introduce again and again a dotted, rhythmical motif extracted from a brief passage by the soloist. In the *Alla Polacca* finale, the three supporting instruments also have frequently to interject the basic polonaise rhythm and there are actually two very brief moments when the second violin exchanges a phrase with the soloist!

Spohr's final *quatuor brillant*, Op.93 in A major, was written in the unsettled period which followed the death of his first wife, Dorette, and before his remarriage to Marianne Pfeiffer early in 1836. In this work the differences between the "brilliant" and the "true" quartet are less obvious though the three-movement form is retained. There are certainly brilliant flourishes for the soloist but also useful contributions from the other instruments. The soft and dreamy *Larghetto*, in particular, is less florid than one might expect in a *quatuor brillant*, certainly in comparison with its predecessor, Op.83.

The finale has a lively rhythm in both main themes which made it a popular favourite wherever Spohr played it. In fact Op.93 attracted a number of later 19th century virtuosos such as Joachim and Wilma Norman-Neruda (later Lady Hallé) and so remained in the chamber music repertoire long after Spohr's "true" quartets had dropped out. It was partly because of this that the belief took hold which claimed that Spohr's quartets kept the spotlight completely on the first violin to the exclusion of the others and that he therefore failed to provide the equal weighting of the instruments demanded by the form. Whereas, of course, the form and function of the *quatuor brillant* is completely different from that of the standard classical quartet.

All of the above points to a clear demarcation line between Spohr's six *quatuors brillants* and his other quartets but, inevitably, things are not quite so simple. For Spohr did refer to three more of his quartets, at least, as "*quatuor brillant*" or "solo-quartet", the usual German term for such works. The G minor quartet, Op.27, of 1812, is referred to in the Autobiography as a solo quartet. Then Op.30 in A major, composed in 1814, is called a "violin-quartet" to which Spohr adds: "Being very brilliant for the first violin it was soon my hobby-horse and I played it innumerable times at private parties." In his own catalogue of his works too, Spohr lists it as a *quatuor brillant*. Finally, in February 1846, more than ten years after Spohr had abandoned the *quatuor brillant*, he composed his Op.132 in A major which he described in a letter to his friend, Adolph

Hesse, as a “brillanten” quartet.

However, all three of these works differ from the ones Spohr published as *quatuors brillants* by adhering to the standard classical format of four movements with a minuet (Op.27 and Op.30) or a scherzo (Op.132) in third place. In addition they are on the broadest scale with fully worked development sections and a degree of complexity and intensity to which the conventional *quatuor brillant* never aspired. The other three instruments have far more to do in them than in the *quatuors brillants*, including much motivic work. The technical demands on the first violin differ too. Here, while the soloist is busy for much of the time, there are fewer examples of brilliant passagework to be found with the exception of Op.30 and the first movement of Op.27. Instead the technique is more closely tied in to the musical argument, making these quartets rather special examples of a mixed genre type as Glenewinkel recognised.

To these three quartets we can add two others which, while Spohr did not designate them as “solo” or “brillant”, resemble them closely in the role given to the first violin. They are Op.58 No.2 in A minor of 1821 and Op.82 No.1 in E major from 1828. Indeed, in the latter quartet Spohr adopts the condensed sonata form he used in Op.68 and Op.83 by omitting the first subject from the recapitulation, a procedure he adheres to in both the first and last movements. In the opening *Allegro*, what appears to be a large degree of solo violin passagework eventually turns out to be an integral part of the movement as it spreads to the other instruments and dominates the development where it is eventually reduced to its simplest rhythmic form as it creates a huge crescendo which bursts into the recapitulation.

What inspired Spohr to incorporate some of the solo violin domination of his *quatuors brillants* into these otherwise solid examples of the classical string quartet? Undoubtedly, the answer lies in his often stated quest to test himself in all branch of composition extending from the major classical forms, fugues and canons to a waltz modelled on the first Viennese masters of the genre, Johann Strauss and Josef Lanner.

Spohr heard and played in quartets in this mixed mode composed by his friends Andreas Romberg and Friedrich Fesca as well as earlier examples by Franz Krommer which must have provided the spur for him to emulate and, indeed, hope to surpass them. However, none of the quartets of these composers have survived in the repertoire so that mixed mode works of this sort are unknown to present chamber music audiences.

So these five quartets offer the biggest challenge to a performer. In the *quatuors brillants* Spohr has given the first violinist licence to behave like a concerto soloist while in his “true” quartets he has warned against this and insisted on the ensemble nature of the performers whose prime aim must be to bring out the idea and spirit of the composer.

But the five quartets in mixed mode provide the first violinist with the difficult task of finding the right balance between the free ego of the *quatuor brillant* and the teamwork of the “true” quartet. Here, the composer’s idea must certainly remain paramount yet at certain moments freedom of action must be granted to the soloist if these five works are to make their greatest effect. It would certainly enliven a modern chamber music recital if one could be revived.

Perhaps, based on the experience of recordings, here and in the six *quatuors brillants* the solution is to avoid using an established quartet whose leader is trained instinctively to recoil from taking too dominating a role and, instead, recruit a specially assembled group involving a violinist whose career has been mainly as a soloist. What an experience it would be if we could hear such works played by star violinists of our own day just as the 19th century had such an opportunity from Spohr himself and such performers as Joachim to enjoy the effect of the *quatuor brillant* fulfilling its original function to “provide the solo performer with a vehicle to display his virtuosity in small musical circles.”