

# AN ANALYTICAL PROGRAMME NOTE ON SPOHR'S FIFTH SYMPHONY

translated by Chris Tutt

IN 1959, to mark the centenary of Spohr's death, his Fifth Symphony was revived and performed by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in two concerts held in the city's Konzertsaal der Hochschule für Musik on November 4 and 5. Paul Schmitz was the conductor and the full programme was: 1. Spohr: Symphony No.5 in C minor, Op.102; 2. Schumann: Cello Concerto in A minor, Op.129 (soloist, Zara Nelsova); 3. R. Strauss: Suite from *Bürger als Edelmann*, Op.60.

The programme for the concerts contained an analytical note signed merely P.W. This is translated here and slightly expanded to explain its composition and place in Spohr's output.

In 1811 Spohr wrote his First Symphony for the second Musical Festival at Frankenhausen. The Second was composed in London in 1820 and the Third in Kassel in 1827. The Fourth became known under its programmatic title of *Die Weihe der Töne* ("The Consecration of Sound"); and was the Spohr symphony which still received performances in the early part of the 20th century.

The symphony being played at the 1959 concerts, No.5 in C minor, Op.102, was composed in July and August 1837. During Spohr's stay in Vienna in July that year the directors of the city's *Concerts spirituels* had asked the composer for a symphony for the opening concert of their next season. Already on the journey home from Vienna to Kassel Spohr was planning the new work in the coach and then he scored it within a few days after his arrival in Kassel.

The symphony has a particular importance as it is one of the works in which Spohr managed to reach forward beyond his typical style to a real power of expression. The themes are treated more firmly and the formal layout is masterly.

For the first movement Spohr used an overture he had written earlier in 1837 on Raupach's play *Die Tochter der Luft* ("The Daughter of the Air"), based on one of the mythical dramas by the Spanish playwright Calderon. In letters, Spohr explained that in converting the overture for the symphony he had only substituted a new slow introduction.

The first movement opens with an *Andante* in C major in 4/4. A four-bar opening theme rises over a tonic pedal point and its continuation modulates to E minor. Its further harmonic course is broadly formed with chords of sixths and sevenths. The boundary between the close of the introduction and the start of the *Allegro* is blurred as the quicker tempo is reached by a *poco a poco stringendo* transition.

The *Allegro* is in the tonic C minor, 9/8. A two-bar theme dominates the first subject material. The bridge passage to the second subject develops its own thematic material. The second subject, introduced by the strings, is in the relative major, according to the classical pattern. After broadly laid out crescendos, the development section begins, being linked to the codetta of the exposition. A *pp* diminuendo prepares the way for an oboe solo accompanied by the strings; its thematic material is taken from the slow introduction. This episode is emphasised by a change of time signature, 9/8 to 3/4. With the return to 9/8 begins the working out with imitation of the second subject which has its opening phrase condensed for greater movement, and is heard over an eight-bar pedal point.

After the return of the strings to 3/4, there is a tense juxtaposition of 3/4 and 9/8. The pedal

point changes to G major and the first violins bring in the theme from the slow introduction *dolce pianissimo*. The woodwind play phrases from the bridge passage. The recapitulation now follows with the return of the first subject and its continuation is extended and gains in importance. After the repeat of the bridge passage and the second subject (in the tonic major), the coda begins in A flat and the tonality becomes clouded. The movement seems to be coming to an end over a pedal point which suggests C minor but then it brightens to C major and ends with a rising chord of that key.

The second movement, *Larghetto* in A flat, 4/4, is Spohr's outstanding slow movement in his symphonies. The instrumentation is of historic interest as three trombones are used here for the first time in a slow movement. Even the first bar of the impressive main theme provides an interesting harmonic progression. The theme is repeated and then comes a subsidiary theme.

A contrasting middle section to the movement is provided by a fugato for the strings with accompanying chords on the wind instruments in semi-quaver triplets. The reprise begins with the second version of the main theme and its subsidiary is extended into the coda where phrases from the middle section assume importance.

The third movement, *Scherzo* in C minor, 3/4, abandons through its choice of key the hitherto usual classical tonal scheme for the cycle of movements. Although Spohr limits himself to just one theme in the first part, this movement is one of the composer's most original scherzos. Out of the four-bar introduction, in which the first horn plays a rising minor second, springs a theme which is unusual for Spohr. After its repetition, there is a continuation built up of sequences. Following the repeat of this section, the middle part brings in the theme and its continuation again but now with different harmony.

After this the first section returns. A bridge passage leads to the *Trio*, in D flat major, for the wind section with the strings accompanying merely with pizzicato chords. Flute, clarinet and bassoon develop the theme. The return of the *Scherzo* repeats the first part and the second section leads to the coda.

The fourth movement, *Presto* in C minor, 4/4, impresses one by its very rich contrapuntal working which goes far beyond anything found in Spohr's other symphonies. The first subject, which is introduced by the strings in imitation, is constructed in an A-A-B form. A subsidiary theme is introduced over a dominant pedal point by the first violins and flute, supported by woodwind chords. The main phrase of the first subject, its inversion, and the subsidiary theme are treated in the bridge passage as if in a development section. In this the contrapuntal layout is again very much emphasised.

The second subject is formed from material taken from the slow introduction to the first movement. Yet already, as the second subject is repeated, phrases from the first subject are heard as well and these are developed and extended harmonically in the codetta.

This thematic working out is continued in the development section too. The recapitulation is shortened and begins with the second part of the main theme. After the start in C minor, an enharmonic modulation from A flat to G sharp takes place so that the bridge passage does not start in the tonic but in E major.

The second subject follows the same harmonic course as in the exposition. In the coda, which begins in A flat, the second subject is taken up first; then comes a modulation back to C major and the closing cadence is formed with the main phrase of the first subject.