

# SPOHR AND BEETHOVEN

by Keith Warsop

THE revelation of a public figure's private views can often cause massive damage to their reputations. Two important 19th century artists suffered immeasurably from the posthumous publication of their autobiographies in which they set out candidly their personal opinions on their craft.

After the death of English novelist Anthony Trollope in 1882 his autobiography appeared the following year and his comments there in comparing novel-writing to trades such as a cobbler's outraged the younger generation of the period who had espoused the "art for art's sake" aesthetic. Trollope's unfavourable views on fellow novelists Dickens and Disraeli, who were found wanting in comparison with his hero Thackeray, also caused offence at a time when Dickens, dead for just 13 years, was placed on a pedestal above all others.

Likewise, when Louis Spohr's autobiography was published a year after his death in 1859, his criticisms of Beethoven came when worship of that composer was at its height. The power and impact of Beethoven had overshadowed the reputations of Haydn and Mozart and only Bach was allowed a share of the throne. Of course, Haydn and Mozart were not neglected but only certain of their works were allowed into the core repertoire and many of the pieces enjoyed by today's audiences were completely unknown.

Incensed by Spohr's criticisms, the Beethovenites developed strong prejudices against Spohr and his music and their vicious reaction has survived to colour many present-day attitudes.

Whereas Trollope's novels eventually made a remarkable comeback in the second half of the 20th century, a Spohr revival has been slow and uncertain and still looks a long way off. It is definitely too early to say with any confidence that the wider availability of many of his works in recordings and in print over the past 20 years or so will at some future stage make a mark on the mainstream musical world.

Ironically, Spohr himself played an important part in establishing a standard repertoire of classical works and so did much to make Beethoven's music more widely known. In the light of this fact, this essay intends to look at Spohr's general attitude to Beethoven, both in his comments on the music and his performances of it.

The general view seems to be that Spohr adored Beethoven's early string quartets, Op.18, but was unable to understand or appreciate his later works from about the time of the Fifth Symphony onwards. That certainly is the impression given in broadcast introductions to a Spohr piece in which comments are made such as "He rejected Beethoven's later music *in toto*"; or "Spohr was a conservative who could not understand Beethoven's later music."

Music reviewers in newspapers adopt similar attitudes and even specialist record magazines whose contributors might be expected to have a more sophisticated understanding are not immune. Even this year one such reviewer commented that, compared with the works Beethoven was writing at the time, Spohr's first two clarinet concertos were "small beer"!

The truth is more complex and is bound up with Spohr's view that music which strove for the highest and most serious achievements deserved a hearing. That is why he supported the young Wagner and, in the face of incomprehension and hostility from some of his close colleagues, conducted this music, even if he, at times, expressed his difficulties in coming to terms with it.

Exactly the same position applies to Spohr's approach to Beethoven and so his attitudes to the music appear ambiguous. Nevertheless, Spohr saw it as his duty to his art to promote and

perform Beethoven's music with complete disregard for the period in which it was written or any of his own problems in appreciating it. Furthermore, we have to take account of the contemporary position. Spohr knew Beethoven personally from his time in Vienna 1812-15 and the two men became friends. So, from Spohr's point of view, Beethoven had not hardened into the great classic who was beyond criticism whereas to Spohr that was certainly the case with Mozart.

Just as contemporaries of, say, Brahms or Wagner, could pick and choose as to which works they found acceptable, so Spohr felt able to do the same in relation to Beethoven. Individual works were not divided into "good" and "bad"; instead some sections of them might be approved while other parts might be found wanting. This, of course, is how all contemporary music is judged. As 20th century composers whose standing is now "untouchable" such as Britten or Shostakovich produced their "masterpieces", so they were picked over by the critics of the time and not always appreciated.

During his study trip to Russia with his violin teacher, Franz Eck, in 1802-03, Spohr got to know Beethoven's music. In the autobiography Spohr relates how Eck was asked to perform a violin sonata of Beethoven's with a 16-year-old local pianist who showed a surprising skill. Spohr goes on: "He excused himself on the plea of great fatigue. As I well knew that Eck did not dare to play any piece at sight that he did not know, I offered to play in his stead. It is true, the sonata was wholly unknown to me but I trusted to my readiness in reading. I was successful; and the young artist in whom probably little confidence had been felt was overwhelmed with praise."

About this time, too, he became acquainted with Beethoven's Op.18 quartets and from then on promoted them with ceaseless vigour as many accounts in the autobiography show. For the rest of his life, Beethoven's quartets remained in his repertoire and he usually played one in most of his chamber concerts right up to the end of his active career as a performer in 1858.

After his appointment as music director at the court of Gotha in 1805 Spohr had the opportunity to conduct orchestral concerts on a regular basis and his promotion of Beethoven's music expanded into this sphere. With his wife, Dorette, who was an excellent pianist, as soloist Spohr directed Beethoven's earlier piano concertos as well as some of the symphonies.

However, he had some problems in coming to grips with Beethoven's works of around 1805. In a letter to his publisher, Ambrosius Kühnel, in 1808 Spohr wrote: "I do not yet know Beethoven's newest quartet [Op.74]. His last three quartets [Op.59] as well as the newest symphonies (which do in fact have some lighter points) and especially his overture to *Leonora*, are for me totally unbearable. They seem to me to be like the rhapsodies of a madman."

Nevertheless, Spohr obtained editions of Beethoven's latest works from Kühnel and studied them in detail so that by 1810, as Martin Wulffhorst has shown, he played Beethoven's middle-period quartets Op.59 and Op.74 with his quartet in Gotha.

Furthermore, Spohr's appreciation of other middle-period works by Beethoven is on record. In 1813 Spohr played the violin concerto in Vienna while his pupil, Malibran, stated that the *Egmont* Overture was one of his favourites and he was always greatly moved by it. In addition, when the English composer, William Sterndale Bennett, visited Spohr in Kassel in 1842 he noted that Spohr expressly wished him to hear Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* which was scheduled at the city's opera house. Spohr was greatly disappointed that this was not possible because one of the leading singers was indisposed and the performance was cancelled.

It is significant that the plots of both *Egmont* and *Fidelio* deal with the fight for freedom and the struggle against tyranny, issues dear to Spohr's own heart. If there were any misgivings about the music, they were swept away in the enthusiasm for the subject and the convincing way Beethoven treated it

But other Beethoven works of this period also meant a great deal to Spohr. While in Vienna

he took part in the first performance of the Seventh Symphony under the composer's direction in 1812. Spohr said that the Seventh, especially its *Allegretto* second movement "made upon me, also, a deep and lasting impression." He added that the execution was "a complete masterpiece".

Even Spohr's critical comments on Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which have so often been extracted from the autobiography and used to belabour Spohr's total incomprehension of this great work, are surrounded by other complimentary comments.

These include: "[There are] many individual beauties. [The opening] short and easily comprehended theme permits of being carried out very thematically and is combined with the other principal ideas of the first subject in an ingenious and effective manner. ... The *Adagio* is ... very fine. ... The *Scherzo* is highly original and of real romantic colouring. ... The return of the *Scherzo* in the finale is so happy an idea that the composer may be envied for it. Its effect is most captivating!" Spohr regrets the return of the "unmeaning noise" afterwards, a criticism of the symphony's finale which is made by some listeners even at the present day.

It was of 1812 that he wrote of Vienna: "The two greatest composers and reformers of musical taste, Haydn and Mozart, had lived there, and there produced their masterpieces. The generation still lived which had seen them arise and formed their taste in art from them. The worthy successor of these art-heroes, Beethoven, still resided there and was now at the zenith of his fame and in the full strength of his creative power."

There is nothing in this reference to Beethoven to suggest that Spohr had anything other than the greatest admiration for the composer and his music and in later years he continued to promote it with unabated enthusiasm. While engaged as director of the Frankfurt opera in 1817-19 Spohr organised the first public chamber music concerts in the city in which he included quartets by Beethoven alongside those of Haydn and Mozart in his programmes.

During this time he also conducted a series of concerts which included most of Beethoven's symphonies apart, of course, from the yet-to-be-written Ninth.

After moving to Kassel in 1822 Spohr continued to perform Beethoven's works and on Good Friday 1828 conducted for the first time the Ninth Symphony. From then on it was a feature of his repertoire when a chorus was available. Particularly notable was the Beethoven Festival in Bonn in 1845 to mark the inauguration of a monument to the composer. Spohr conducted both the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony ... in one concert!

The English musician, Sir George Smart, was present and noted that he had never heard the Ninth performed so well; he praised Spohr's conducting and pointed out that the attention to the *pianos* and the *fortes* was especially well observed. Also present was the composer and pianist Ignaz Moscheles who noted in his diary that he was "enthralled" with the way that Spohr conducted the symphony "almost faultlessly."

Two years earlier, when Spohr conducted a Philharmonic Society evening in London, the scherzo and finale of the Ninth were included in a Royal Command concert attended by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

We can also point to Spohr's Historical Symphony of 1839 in which Beethoven is the only composer who has a whole movement dedicated solely to himself. The *scherzo* is "The Age of Beethoven" whereas Bach and Handel share the first movement, Haydn and Mozart the second one while the "Modern Age" finale mentions no individual composer at all.

Spohr was also happy to utilise some of Beethoven's individual ideas. The Quartet-Concerto of 1845 follows Beethoven's Violin Concerto of 40 years earlier by opening with quiet drum taps while in his Sextet of 1848 Spohr remembers Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the return of the *scherzo* in the finale, "so happy an idea that the composer may be envied for it."

In the Sextet the *scherzo* returns in the finale though Spohr develops the idea a stage further

by recalling it for a second time and then briefly quoting it in the coda.

All of this seems to show that Spohr was able to appreciate Beethoven's middle-period works. His harshest comments were reserved for the Ninth Symphony though even here he found "flashes of genius".

At the time Spohr was friendly with Beethoven the increasing effect of his deafness was becoming apparent. Spohr felt that this "of a necessity must have had a prejudicial effect upon his fancy. His constant endeavour to be original and to open new paths could no longer, as formerly, be preserved from error by the guidance of the ear."

Spohr says that there are people who claim they can understand the last works of Beethoven and, in their pleasure at that, rank them above his earlier masterpieces. He adds: "But I am not of the number and freely confess that I have never been able to relish the last works of Beethoven."

It would appear from this that Spohr allowed his personal experience of Beethoven's difficulties with his hearing to colour his approach to the late works and perhaps listen to them on the lookout for problems caused by the deafness, thus letting his theory control his reactions. Another factor may be that Spohr's reverence for Mozart affected his judgment of the late works so that the distance they had moved from the classical proportions of his hero was distressing to him.

When Spohr first met Beethoven in Vienna in 1813, the latter's deafness had already reached the stage where it was causing problems so that he was immediately aware of it. Spohr tells us in the autobiography: "Upon my arrival in Vienna I immediately paid a visit to Beethoven; I did not find him at home and therefore left my card.

"I now hoped to meet him at some of the musical parties to which he was frequently invited but was soon informed that Beethoven, since his deafness had so much increased that he could no longer hear music connectedly, had withdrawn himself from all musical parties and had become very shy of all society.

"I made trial therefore of another visit; but again without success. At length I met him quite unexpectedly at the eating-house where I was in the habit of going with my wife every day at the dinner hour. I had already now given concerts and twice performed my oratorio. The Vienna papers had noticed them favourably. Beethoven had therefore heard of me when I introduced myself to him and he received me with an unusual friendliness of manner.

"We sat down at the same table and Beethoven became very chatty, which much surprised the company as he was generally taciturn and sat gazing listlessly before him. But it was an unpleasant task to make him hear me and I was obliged to speak so loud as to be heard in the third room off. Beethoven now came frequently to these dining rooms and visited me also at my house. We thus soon became well acquainted. Beethoven was a little blunt, not to say uncouth; but a truthful eye beamed from under his bushy eyebrows.

"After my return from Gotha I met him now and then at the *Theater an der Wien*, close behind the orchestra where Count Palffy had given him a free seat. After the opera he generally accompanied me to my house and passed the rest of the evening with me. He could then be very friendly with Dorette and the children.

"He spoke of music but very seldom. When he did, his opinions were very sternly expressed and so decided as would admit of no contradiction whatever. In the works of others he took not the least interest; I therefore had not the courage to show him mine."

Quite why Spohr should be singled out for his objections to Beethoven's late works can be explained only by the fact that his views were eventually published and also that he was the most eminent musician to hold such opinions. Many other respected musicians of the time also found

it difficult to come to terms with these compositions.

Spohr's Kassel colleague, the theorist Moritz Hauptmann whose promotion of J.S. Bach has ensured him a high reputation as a judge of the best music, was equally ill-at-ease with late Beethoven.

In 1832, in a letter to his friend, the Munich singer Franz Hauser, he wrote of Beethoven's late quartets: "We have frequently heard the last published quartets of Beethoven at the weekly quartet meetings organised by Wiele and Hasemann. They jarred on me more than I can tell you, not the first time, but the oftener I heard them. That objectless rambling about is so painfully depressing that it is hard to get on at all without a release by Mozart or Haydn directly afterwards: *In seiner Ordnung schafft der Herr*. Freedom appears only within the sphere of limitation. I could say more on that subject but it is clear to my mind that Art has lost nothing by Beethoven's death."

Thirteen years later, by which time Hauptmann was based in Leipzig, he was still having problems, this time with the *Missa Solemnis*. He told Hauser: "We gave Beethoven's Mass twice in the Church. Much of it is, I admit, of the colossal order, and I doubt whether any man who ever wrote a Mass wrote with such lofty intentions, but I cannot learn to like the music, notwithstanding.

"To oblige Härtel I wrote an account of the performance in the *Musikalische Zeitung*, but it went against the grain to do so. The use, or abuse, I should say, of the voice irritates me beyond bearing. What an absurdity too, to write all the music in such a way that no singer can sing it as it stands, without the aid of instruments! I like the *Kyrie* very much. The end of the *Gloria* is unbearable."

Hauptmann's views, too, were eventually published but nobody has attacked him in the way that Spohr has been. Indeed, Hauptmann's reputation as a sane critic is often invoked when his negative views on some of Spohr's compositions are quoted.

Despite his feelings about late Beethoven, Spohr continued to do his best for these works as Sir George Smart and other observers have reported. What is clear, though, is that despite Spohr's reservations about parts of the Fifth Symphony, he seemed in no doubt about the stature of Beethoven's middle-period works as a whole. By extending Spohr's opinions of the last works to cover all but the Op. 18 quartets we do him an injustice and belittle his own accomplishment in establishing many of these pieces in the standard repertoire.

Martin Wulffhorst has pointed out that Spohr appears to have been the first musician to programme quartets by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven in the same concert, as early as 1804, thus setting a model for many concerts to come. By conducting Beethoven's symphonies at many concerts and music festivals over a 40-year period he did much to bring them to a large number of listeners. In addition he directed *Fidelio* several times in Kassel even though French operas by the likes of Adam and Auber were more in demand by the public.

Spohr's comments on Beethoven in the autobiography date from 1847 or a year or two later. When he returned to it towards the last years of his life he did not revise those comments but these later sections do not contain such strong criticisms of Beethoven's last works.

Perhaps after all he had second thoughts following a visit to Kassel by the violin Joseph Joachim with his quartet during the 1850s. Joachim and his colleagues performed for Spohr one of Beethoven's last quartets and afterwards Spohr admitted that with careful preparation and much hard work it was indeed possible to make them enjoyable to the listener.