

FOUR FURTHER SPOHR MYSTERIES

by Keith Warsop

Introduction

PREVIOUS Spohr mysteries were considered in *Spohr Journal* 27 for Winter 2000, pages 15-19 (1. The Rondo for Violin and Harp, "Op.88"; 2. Psalm XXIV, Op.97a; 3. Trio for Violin, Viola and Guitar. WoO.138; 4. Konzertstück for Clarinet and Orchestra) and in *Spohr Journal* 28 for Winter 2001, pages 30-35 (1. Spohr's slow movements; 2. Spohr and Bach; 3. Spohr's Russian tune; 4. Spohr's Harp Trio). Fresh light was thrown on some of these subjects while others remain mysterious.

1. Cadenzas to Beethoven's Violin Concerto, WoO.46

The fact that Spohr wrote cadenzas for Beethoven's Violin Concerto may come as a surprise to many outside the circle of Spohr scholarship. After all, the general prejudice is that Spohr was out of sympathy with all except the works of Beethoven's first period, such as the string quartets Op.18. Leslie Orrey, for instance, states: "He was unsympathetic to the later Beethoven; in the whole of his *Autobiography* there is no reference to the greatest of all violin concertos." [BACHARACH 1958].

As Spohr's cadenzas were not published until 1896 they have remained little known and hardly ever played. They appeared in print in the Edition Charnot in London (No.741) though credited to a Leipzig printer. The title page reads:

"Edition Charnot". Trois Cadences pour le CONCERTO DE VIOLON de L.VAN BEETHOVEN par Louis Spohr. 741. Price 3/-. Printed by C.G.Röder, Leipzig.

This edition gives no clue as to the date of composition but in his Spohr thematic catalogue, Folker Göthel speculates about two possible occasions when Spohr might have written the cadenzas [GÖTHEL 1981]. He mentions the first performance of Beethoven's concerto at the Kassel subscription concerts conducted by Spohr in 1842 when the soloist was Adolf Wiele, the leader of the Kassel orchestra and also second violinist in Spohr's regular quartet; But Göthel thinks a more likely case can be made for an 1853 concert by August Kömpel (1831-1891), Spohr's favourite pupil who inherited the master's Stradivarius violin. Göthel points out that Spohr's autograph of the cadenzas was to be found in Kömpel's estate though its present whereabouts are unknown.

However, Göthel notes that, as shown by a letter to his publisher, Ambrosius Kühnel, dated 16th July 1807, Spohr had already got to know Beethoven's concerto shortly after it first appeared in print. It is evident, though, that Göthel was unaware of Spohr performing the concerto himself at any time; at least, he does not mention this possibility.

In fact, Spohr played the concerto in 1813 during his time in Vienna at a time when he was on friendly terms with Beethoven though, as noted by Orrey, Spohr makes no mention of this in his *Autobiography*.

The Russian musicologist, Lev Ginsburg, investigated the matter for his book on the Belgian virtuoso Henri Vieuxtemps [GINSBURG 1984]. Ginsburg refers to Vieuxtemps' performance of the concerto in Vienna on 16th March 1834 and the violinist's diary entry that his was the first public performance of the work. In a footnote, Ginsburg states that Vieuxtemps did not know of the four such occasions in Beethoven's lifetime which he specifies as Franz Clement in 1806,

Luigi Tomasini in 1812 and 1814, and Spohr in 1813.

The question therefore arises as to whether Spohr composed his cadenzas for this 1813 concert and merely recycled them 40 years later for Kömpel. We do not know; one of the many mysteries about Spohr's work which is still unsolved. Stylistically and technically these cadenzas are similar to the one in Spohr's own Eighth Violin Concerto of 1816, especially the fanfare-like double-stopped semi-quaver passages. Whatever the date of composition, surely it is time for a modern violinist to let us hear these cadenzas in performance.

2. Fantasy for Harp, Op.35

Spohr's Fantasy in C minor, Op.35, must be his most often performed composition. It is in the basic repertoire of nearly all harpists, often turns up as an audition piece and, with more than 20 recordings to its credit, is easily his most recorded work. Among those harpists who have committed their performances to disc are Claudia Antonelli, Elinor Bennett, Gabriela dall'Olio, Olga Erdely, Elizabeth Hainen, Marion Hofmann, Ursula Holliger, Hubert Jelinek, Frances Kelly, Brigitte Langnickel-Köhler, Anna Lelkes, Susann McDonald, Susanna Mildonian, Andrea Vigh, David Watkins (twice), Eduard Witsenburg, Naoko Yoshino, Nicanor Zabaleta and Jutta Zoff.

So what mysteries can there be over such a well-known core harp repertoire work? In fact, there are two; one a practical performing matter and the other to do with a published edition.

Spohr composed the Fantasy for his wife, the harp virtuoso Dorette Spohr, and allowed it to be published in 1816 as Op.35. The published key of the Fantasy is C minor and it is always performed and recorded in that tonality. As Spohr allowed the piece to be published without any indication that C minor was not intended as the sounding key, we can assume that he was happy about the matter but we should bear in mind that at the time of composition Spohr was already utilising the special harp tuning devised to allow him and Dorette to perform violin and harp duos together.

This involved tuning the harp a semi-tone lower than concert pitch and writing the part in a flat key which produced less tension on the strings with fewer pedals being brought into play, thus overcoming a hazard of the harps of that period. The violin part was written a semi-tone lower than the harp part in a sharp key at concert pitch. Thus a harp part in E \flat would match a violin part in D. The first work in which Spohr applied this technique in full is believed to be the Sonata Concertante, Op.113, composed in 1806 nearly one year before the Fantasy.

There is therefore a strong possibility that Spohr originally envisaged the Fantasy in B minor but wrote it out in C minor so that Dorette could use the transposed tuning as in the duos. To back up this theory, Martin Wulforth has found a report of the Spohrs' concert in Berlin on 9th January 1810 in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* which states that Dorette played the Fantasy in B minor. Perhaps some present-day harpist might like to try it out in that key and give their reaction.

The second mystery concerns an edition published in Bayreuth in 1900 in the catalogue of Carl Giessel junior (no.198) arranged anonymously for violin and piano. The edition is dedicated "à Monsieur Louis de Reeder" who is otherwise unknown to fame. Folker Göthel speculates that as the arrangement is so skilfully done in Spohr's style it might be the composer's own, perhaps so that the Spohrs could add the Fantasy to their duo repertoire at one of the times when Dorette had switched from the harp to the piano (either 1816 or 1821).

It would be simple to convert the piano part back to the harp and then interesting to include this version of the Fantasy on a future recording of Spohr's violin and harp duos. We hope that may come about.

3. Two posthumous quartets, Op.155 (WoO.41) and Op.157 (WoO.42)

The literature on Spohr seems quite clear that the composer placed an embargo on any

performances of his last two string quartets. The authority for this belief is the section of Spohr's *Autobiography* added by his widow after his death and covering his final years.

First, though, we have to clear the somewhat muddy waters over the numbering of these quartets. Spohr himself did not help matters when he began to number his quartets starting with the A major, Op.132, of 1846. This was actually his 31st but Spohr miscounted his previous ones and numbered it as the 30th. This and subsequent quartets therefore were one lower than their real number in both Spohr's autographs and the first editions.

In line with this mistake Spohr thought that the first of the two posthumous quartets was his 34th whereas it should have been No.35. Consequently the final one is the 36th and this is the total number of his quartets, whatever some older musical reference books may state.

The part of the *Autobiography* dealing with these two last quartets seems unequivocal in its view that the composer did not wish these works to be performed. Marianne Spohr picks up the story in August 1856 after Spohr had completed his six songs for baritone with violin and piano, Op.154:

"Spohr now determined to write another quartet (his 34th), upon terminating which he immediately opened the winter series of his still continued quartet circle with it. Although 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; nor did he write another until a whole twelvemonth had elapsed: this differed in every respect from the former, and he substituted it for it under the same number. Upon its first performance at the quartet meeting this piece of music pleased him right well; but shortly afterwards it seemed to him to require many improvements, and as these did not turn out to his satisfaction, sorrowfully, but resigned to the consciousness that he could no longer carry out in a satisfactory manner the ideas which floated before his fancy, he associated the new 34th quartet with that which he had previously rejected, and expressed the wish to his wife that neither should at any time be made public."

However there is contradictory evidence from Spohr's own pen that at one stage he was quite happy for these quartets to be published. As late as December 1857 Spohr wrote to his friend, Wilhelm Speyer, the Frankfurt banker and Lieder composer:

"The Philharmonic Society in London has asked me for a symphony for their next season, but I have refused because, though I recently wrote some quartets which seem good enough to be added to the others, I do not feel myself capable of writing a symphony which could be put beside the early ones, and so I must take care not to fall in the estimation of the public – especially the English public. Had the Philharmonic Society invited me to conduct their concerts this year, I should have accepted, for I feel that I am still perfectly equal to such a task, both in mind and body."

So, well over a year after completing the revised version of the 1855 quartet, Spohr still thought highly enough of it to couple it with his more recent one and to count the two as part of his overall quartet output. This still leaves unexplained the mystery of why Spohr gave the same number (34) to both quartets though we can suggest a reason why the composer subsequently banned their being made public.

On Boxing Day 1857, soon after writing to Speyer, Spohr broke his left arm when he slipped and fell on the ice and although it healed remarkably quickly he found he could no longer play the violin with his old fluency and so laid aside his instrument forever. Just before this accident he felt inspired to begin composing a Requiem which he looked upon as the crown and conclusion of his life's work but by April 1858 decided that he no longer had the ability to produce compositions of such magnitude.

These two blows to his performing and composing life plunged him into a deep melancholy and he began to doubt the quality of his last completed pieces. So his change of mood and ban on the performance of these last two quartets almost certainly came during this lengthy period of depression.

Some evidence that this is the correct interpretation of the sequence of events can be found in the statement in the *Autobiography* that Spohr felt he “could no longer carry out in a satisfactory manner the ideas which floated before his fancy” which matches entirely his conclusion of April 1858 that he no longer had the ability to compose works of any magnitude.

Recent publication of these two final quartets (by Merton Music as No.35 in E♭ major, Op.155, and No.36 in G minor, Op.157) has put them into the public domain and already reports from performers who have played them have been positive, matching Spohr’s own view of December 1857. We will never know whether Spohr’s later change of mind about the validity of these quartets was a considered artistic response or merely caused by the depression from which he suffered from April 1858 on.

4. Variations on themes of Haydn, Op.6 and Op.8

As a young violin virtuoso Spohr soon found that he could bring his concerts and recitals to a rousing conclusion by finishing up with Pierre Rode’s Variations in E♭ major, Op.10. This piece was scored for solo violin plus string trio (violin, viola and cello) and was performed by Rode in his Brunswick concert of July 1803 which so impressed the 19-year-old Spohr.

In preparation for his forthcoming concert tour in the winter of 1804-05, Spohr soon attempted such a composition for this combination himself with his Potpourri in G major, Op.5 and over the next 18 months added two sets of variations, published as Op.6 and Op.8.

The title pages of these two works are printed from the same plate as follows: Variations pour le Violon accompagnées d’un second Violon, Alto et Basse par L. Spohr, oe.VI. A Leipzig. Pr. 16 gr. chez A. Kühnel. Bureau de Musique. (plate numbers 493 and 555).

For many years it was assumed that the themes on which these variations were based were either Spohr’s own or by an unknown, perhaps minor, composer but more recently Martin Wulfhorst has pointed out that in one of his letters to his publisher, Spohr himself stated that the themes were by Haydn.

Dr Wulfhorst quotes from Spohr’s letter to Ambrosius Kühnel of 26th July 1806: “I wish to see my Haydn Variations printed individually, as No.1 and No.2, under the title: *Thème varié* ... Oeuvre 7, No.1 ... No.2”

But the two themes involved resemble none known to be by Haydn. Perhaps they come from some obscure pieces which could be tracked down by wading through the huge double-volume Hoboken Haydn thematic catalogue or, more likely, Spohr found them in one or two of the many spurious publications attributed to Haydn at that time. We can rule out any possibility that they were by Haydn’s younger brother Michael. To Spohr the name Haydn always meant the great composer of *The Creation*, the symphonies and the string quartets.

References

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