

# THE QUESTION OF FORM IN SPOHR'S CONCERTOS

by Keith Warsop

## Introduction

FROM the point of view of the standard concert repertoire the history of the violin concerto is that of the succession of great composers whose works are performed regularly by all violin virtuosi: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Bruch, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, perhaps Dvořák, and then the twentieth century concertos from Sibelius onwards. Occasionally Spohr No 8, Vieuxtemps Nos 4 and 5, Wieniawski No 2, Goldmark and Lalo will get an outing but with the exception of Dvořák the composers of the core works were principally keyboard players even though Mozart and Mendelssohn were competent string performers.

Only Vivaldi with his ubiquitous *Four Seasons* has forced a violin virtuoso's concertos into this exclusive world and even his pre-eminence has been restricted to the later post-war period.

Behind all this lurks an alternative history of the violin concerto – one made by the virtuosi of the instrument. Most of the “great” violin concertos were their composer's only contribution to the genre with just Bach and Mozart having more than one in regular concert performance. It is true that Bruch wrote three but only his First stands alongside Beethoven, Mendelssohn (ignoring here his D minor juvenilia), Brahms and company.

When these composers came to write their violin concertos they generally followed conventional models with an occasional divergence such as the position of the cadenza in the Mendelssohn. When Bruch did differ considerably from the standard concerto in his First he justified this by pointing to the example of Spohr's No 8 as a classic model. So it is the inspired content of these works which gives them their greatness rather than any remarkable innovations in form.

Such innovations were generally introduced by the violin virtuosi and for a simple practical reason: when they were regularly bringing forward new concertos, formal monotony was something they needed to avoid. Each new concerto was a novelty to its first audiences and each novelty by definition had to be different. If a virtuoso was on a tour that was no problem as he could survive on a handful of concertos whose formal layout did not have to be especially distinctive as they would be heard by different audiences during the journey.

But when he settled in one place as Vivaldi did in Venice or Viotti in Paris and later London with two or three concertos at least required each season, too much lack of variety had to be avoided. Therefore, while many of Vivaldi's concertos are in the three-movement, fast-slow-fast format with opening and closing orchestral tutti in the outer movements, he also made sure that there were a reasonable number of exceptions. So we find slow introductions, the soloist starting the concerto, linked movements, thematic cross references, interpolated slow sections in the faster movements and vice versa, while in one remarkable turnaround a concerto begins with what sounds like a simple, dance-like finale and has a weighty, first-movement style conclusion!

Viotti also made innovations, notably a slow introduction in Concerto No 16 which returns to herald the recapitulation. In Concerto No 25 he has a slow introduction, the main orchestral tutti, a return of the introduction this time including the solo violin and then the solo exposition. He also brings in an orchestral surprise – the finale of this same concerto adds a triangle to the ensemble some 60 years before Liszt's First Piano Concerto.

This preamble has been made in order to explain the great formal variety in Spohr's concertos. He was not attempting to write one masterpiece in the genre to stand for all time but needed to renew his repertoire on a regular basis while trying to avoid repeating himself too closely. Formal differences between concertos allowed this to be done successfully.

### **Spohr's Concertos**

If we include the single-movement unfinished violin concerto in D major, WoO 16, of 1809, Spohr altogether composed 29 concertos made up of 19 for solo violin, four for clarinet, two for two violins, two for violin and harp, one for violin and cello and one for string quartet. For the works featuring two soloists Spohr followed the convention of his time by giving them the title of concertante.

According to the composer's Autobiography he wrote some concertos while still a young violinist in the Brunswick court orchestra but only the one in G major, WoO 9, from 1799 has survived. His Op 1 was his official First Violin Concerto of 1802 and by the time of his move from Gotha to Vienna ten years later in 1812 he had completed 16 concertos plus the unfinished WoO 16 mentioned above. A further ten years on this number had risen to 20 but with Spohr's establishment in Kassel from 1822 and his years as a touring virtuoso behind him his concerto output slowed with his remaining eight being written between 1825 and 1845. Spohr's full concerto tally is therefore:

1799	Violin in G major, WoO 9
1802	Violin No 1 in A major, Op 1
1803	Violin in E minor, WoO 10 (rev.1804 with new slow movement)
1803	Violin and Cello in C major, WoO 11
1803/4	Violin in A major, WoO 12
1804	Violin No 2 in D minor, Op 2
1805	Violin No 4 in B minor, Op 10
1806	Violin No 3 in C major, Op 7
1806	Violin and Harp No 1 in G major, WoO 13
1807	Violin and Harp No 2 in E minor, WoO 14
1807	Violin No 5 in E flat major, Op 17
1808	Two Violins No 1 in A major, Op 48
1808	Clarinet No 1 in C minor, Op 26
1808/9	Violin No 6 in G minor, Op 28
1809	Violin in D major, WoO 16 (first movement only)
1810	Clarinet No 2 in E flat major, Op 57
1810	Violin No 10 in A major, Op 62 (revised up to 1824)
1814	Violin No 7 in E minor, Op 38
1816	Violin No 8 in A minor, Op 47 <i>Gesangsszene</i>
1820	Violin No 9 in D minor, Op 55
1821	Clarinet No 3 in F minor, WoO19
1825	Violin No 11 in G major, Op 70
1828	Violin No 12 in A major, Op 79 (Concertino No 1)
1828/9	Clarinet No 4 in E minor, WoO 20
1833	Two Violins No 2 in B minor, Op 88
1835	Violin No 13 in E major, Op 92 (Concertino No 2)
1839	Violin No 14 in A minor, Op 110 <i>Sonst und Jetzt</i> (Concertino No 3)
1844	Violin No 15 in E minor, Op 128
1845	Quartet-Concerto in A minor, Op 131

Violin Concertos 12 (1828), 13 (1835) and 14 (1839) were in condensed through-composed forms which Spohr called concertinos Nos 1-3 but were also published as part of the numerical sequence of 15. The early concertante for violin and cello is also in this condensed form.

### **First movements**

The standard first movement concerto form as found in the masterpieces of Mozart and Beethoven consists of an opening section for orchestra alone in which the main material of the movement is set out; a second section which reworks the exposition to include the soloist; a central part usually called the development but which need not necessarily develop material from the exposition as its main purpose is to modulate away from the tonic before returning to it for the recapitulation which involves the soloist and merges material from the two expository sections; then comes an improvised cadenza leading into a coda.

Of course, individual details differ in each concerto but the broad outlines are unchanged. Sometimes Mozart gives the soloist a new theme not heard in the orchestral opening and this usually turns out to be the movement's genuine second subject though on one occasion this new theme appears in the modulating "development" (Concerto in A major, K 488). In another concerto (E flat major, K 271) Mozart even has the piano sharing the opening bars with the orchestra.

Violin concertos familiar to Spohr by Viotti, Kreutzer and Rode offered further options. There is the new theme in the development used by Mozart and often remarked on as a stroke of genius by commentators who remain blissfully ignorant that it is quite commonplace in Viotti. Kreutzer and Rode often and Viotti occasionally like to start the recapitulation with the second subject and here we frequently find that the movement's opening theme never reappears once the expository sections are over.

Spohr seized on one innovation which Viotti used only three times – the slow introduction for orchestra alone – and attempted to give it the stature of those in the late symphonies of Haydn and Mozart. The early A major Concerto, WoO 12, is his first example of this though in this work he follows Viotti in using it as a curtain raiser to the *Allegro*. Later attempts are more closely riveted to the main part of the movement through thematic links.

The first two concertos with slow introductions, the A major and Third Violin Concerto, go on to a full orchestral exposition but in the First Clarinet Concerto and Eleventh Violin Concerto this is omitted with the soloist entering after only a brief orchestral reference to the main *Allegro* theme. The Second Concertante for Violin and Harp and the Tenth Concerto go even further with the soloists launching the main theme after the slow introduction by the orchestra. In these last four works the introduction may be said to replace the full orchestral exposition in a highly concentrated form.

Another Viotti practice adopted by Spohr for the first time in the Second Violin Concerto is to give the soloist what is superficially a new opening theme but proves on analysis to be a more lyrical formulation of the opening orchestral subject.

The second subject reserved only for the soloist as found in some of Mozart's piano concertos is used by Spohr in the Ninth Concerto. Also in this movement, the opening orchestral tutti follows a frequent practice of Haydn by having both the main subjects based on the same theme. This also allows for a greater impact when the solo violin does introduce its own particular second subject.

The Ninth Concerto is the last time that Spohr used a full-length opening tutti in his violin works though both the Third and Fourth clarinet concertos which he later composed for Simon Hermstedt revert to the traditional orchestral introduction. Perhaps this may have been influenced by the clarinettist himself who may have wanted to "make 'em wait" for his solo entry. The first

two clarinet concertos are more innovative in this respect as the First, as mentioned above, has a slow introduction leading to an *Allegro* which brings in the soloist after only a few bars. In the Second there is a call to attention from the orchestra, the clarinet briefly announces its presence and then a full orchestral tutti unfolds.

A more sophisticated opening is devised for the First Concertante for Two Violins and the Seventh Violin Concerto. In these long note values give the impression of a slow introduction but in fact the tempo is *Allegro* from the start as gradually becomes clear. Furthermore, this “first subject before the first subject” plays an important part in the progress of the movement.

In the Violin Concerto movement in D major Spohr takes a hint from Viotti in his Concerto No 25. A slow introduction leads to the entry of the solo violin in the same tempo before an *Allegro* full solo exposition ensues. Unlike Viotti though, Spohr omits a full orchestral tutti.

Of course, Spohr sometimes composed in “textbook” forms as in his First Violin Concerto in which he perhaps wanted to show his patron, the Duke of Brunswick, that he knew exactly how a traditional concerto movement should be put together. A few later works also follow this conservative design.

The Viotti school’s use of the second subject to start the recapitulation is used by Spohr on a number of occasions. He turned to this method in the violin concertos immediately following his First as if to say “I’ve shown that I know the rules; now let’s use some imagination.” The Second Violin Concert, the E minor WoO 10 and A major WoO 12 are the works involved and among later works the Seventh and Eleventh Concertos use this format though not the Ninth whose powerful opening is ideal for marking the recapitulation.

In Spohr’s last concertos he abolishes the opening orchestral tutti completely and also drops the slow introduction which was used for the last time in the Eleventh Concerto. In the Second Concertante for Two Violins and the Fifteenth Concerto a few orchestral bars precede the solo entry while in the Quartet-Concerto, his final work in the genre, drum taps alone support the cello of the quartet’s statement of the opening theme.

### **The through-composed concertos**

Apart from the three concertinos, Spohr’s Eighth Concerto and the Concertante for Violin and Cello break away from standard three-movement forms, although the Eighth Concerto is superficially akin to these. The first movement of this work, in keeping with the declared aim of being in the style of an operatic scena, alternates between a typical marchlike concerto orchestral opening and passages of recitative from the solo violin with the latter gradually emerging as the dominant force. All three movements are linked by passages of solo violin recitative.

Spohr continued to use slow introductions in the concertinos after he abandoned the practice in his full-scale concertos. In the first, published as the Twelfth Concerto, this develops into an extended prelude with the solo violin indulging in fantasia-like figurations. The second (Thirteenth Concerto) does away with a first movement or an introduction and is reduced to just slow movement and finale while in the third (Fourteenth Concerto) which compares violin styles of the past and present there are introductory bars before the start of the *Menuetto antico*.

The early Concertante for Violin and Cello consists of a sonata-rondo *Allegro* preceded by a slow introduction. However the introduction makes a dramatic reappearance to herald the recapitulation. Furthermore, Spohr gives the *Allegro* the feel of a finale by composing a typical rondo-like 6/8 theme though combining it with sonata principles, a trick first introduced by Haydn from whom Spohr learnt so much about manipulating a listener’s expectations.

### **The slow movements**

Spohr seems to have decided on an ideal form for slow movements quite early in his career. The model was probably Mozart’s Piano Concerto in D minor and the form is A-B-A where a serene,

lyrical melody is followed by a more rhythmically active central section, often in smaller note values. In a few of Spohr's later works such as the Ninth Violin Concerto this is expanded to A-B-A-B-coda.

However, there are other types of slow movements employed by Spohr, especially in the earlier concertos. Both the First and Third violin concertos feature a *Siciliano*, a popular baroque form in 6/8 time. Although Spohr never composed a full-scale variation movement for his concertos, the First Concerto's *Siciliano* does show elements of variation.

The *Adagio* of the Sixth Violin Concerto has often been singled out because of its introduction of recitative where the form is that of an operatic aria and provides a foretaste of the Eighth Concerto where the entire work is based on this idea. A fourth variety of slow movement occurs in the E minor Violin Concerto WoO 10 and the First Clarinet Concerto where we find a simple and beautiful intermezzo without a major contrasting section.

### **The finales**

Throughout Spohr's concertos the dominant finale type is the *Allegretto* rondo in a 2/4 dotted rhythm modelled on those of the Viotti school. However, after his First Violin Concerto, Spohr moved quickly to inject elements of sonata form into this basic design. By the Second Violin Concerto of 1804 he had decided on two main episodes which were recapitulated in sonata style.

The other main finale type was the 3/4 polonaise "alla polacca" but apart from its particular rhythm these followed the formal structure of those in 2/4. The Sixth Violin Concerto and the Fourth Clarinet Concerto offer finales designated "al Espagnol" but apart from Spanish inflections they are like the polonaises and the Sixth Concerto in fact calls for "Tempo di Polacca".

There are a few exceptions from these two main finale types, noticeably those to the First Clarinet Concerto which goes at a brisker pace than usual and the Eighth Concerto which in style and pacing is nearer to a first movement.

### **Cadenzas**

Spohr completely rejected the improvised cadenza as he considered that it pandered to the worst side of soloists; the few cadenzas in his concertos are written out and are quite short. Only three of his concertos have them and the one in the Eighth Concerto is there because of the work's design "in the form of an operatic scena". It comes at the point where the singer would be expected to insert an improvised cadenza but even here it is written out.

The composer experimented with cadenzas in his Fifth Violin Concerto where they appear with orchestral accompaniment while in the First Concertante for Two Violins the soloists echo each other's material.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has looked at the different ways in which Spohr introduced variety into his many concertos. These came from three main sources; firstly the Vienna school of Haydn and Mozart, secondly the French school of Viotti and his pupils, and thirdly from Spohr's own original ideas such as in the works with operatic recitative references or the through-composed concertos. With the Eighth Violin Concerto Spohr invented a type much followed by later composers. Not only Bruch but also Saint-Saëns, Goetz and Glazunov among others benefited from Spohr's example.

What has not been attempted here is traditional musical analysis which can be found in a number of dissertations on Spohr's concertos. The composer's use of tonality is not specific to his concertos but can be found in most of his music so that has not been touched on either as it did not affect the inventiveness of his approach to concerto form.