

LOUIS SPOHR AND BEETHOVEN'S FIFTH SYMPHONY

by Chris Tutt

We continue our policy of reprinting some of the best articles which appeared in early Journals. This one was in Spohr Journal Seven published in Summer 1980.

NOTHING has been more damaging to Spohr's reputation than the criticisms of Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth symphonies found in the composer's Autobiography. It takes an effort of the imagination to understand why Spohr felt the way he did about these great works. He did not have the same reservations about the other Beethoven symphonies; in fact he expressed great admiration for the Seventh which in its own way is just as powerful and original as the Fifth and Ninth. Also, he counted the opera *Fidelio* and the *Egmont* overture among his favourite Beethoven works and these are close to the two symphonies in style.

What then were the distinctive features of these symphonies that Spohr disliked? Let us consider what he actually said about the Fifth: "It has many individual beauties but they do not add up to a classical whole. The very first theme in particular lacks the dignity essential to the opening of a symphony. This aside, however, the short, easily grasped theme lends itself well to thematic elaboration and the composer has combined it most imaginatively and effectively with the other principal motives of the first movement. The Adagio in A flat is very beautiful in part, but the same progressions and modulations are repeated too often, despite ever richer figuration. The scherzo is highly original and of genuinely romantic texture but the trio with its tumbling bass runs is too baroque for my taste. The last movement with its empty noise is the least satisfactory, although the return of the scherzo is such a happy idea that one can only envy the composer who could have thought of such a thing. It is quite irresistible. What a pity that the effect is so soon dissipated by the resumption of the noise!"

In his words about the Ninth Symphony it is again the finale that he found most difficult to accept. Both finales are triumphant answers in the major key to the powerful, sombre tones of the minor key first movements. It is the emotional effect of this strong contrast which makes such an impact on audiences. This sort of relationship between a first movement and a finale was a novel inspiration on Beethoven's part, not found in earlier symphonies, though repeated many times afterwards in such works as Brahms's First Symphony, Tchaikovsky's Fourth and Fifth, and Mahler's Second.

Spohr evidently felt uneasy about the emotional impact of such movements and considered that they did not conform to his ideal structure of a classical symphony. In fact, Haydn and Mozart, with the stature of their last symphonies, had left a considerable problem of formal balance to their successors. What was to be the most suitable type of finale for a symphony with more powerful expression in its earlier movements? The traditional, light-hearted finale of the eighteenth century would no longer suffice. Mozart provided superb examples of finales of greater emotional weight in his last two symphonies. Beethoven's nine symphonies are very distinctive in character and each has an individual answer to this problem. It is worth noting, however, that for both the Fifth and Ninth Beethoven at first considered using quick, passionate movements in the minor key. The rejected finale of the Ninth was later reworked as the finale of the A minor string quartet, Op 132. The finale of the big symphony was for Schubert, too, a

problem which he solved brilliantly in the "Great" C major but may have caused him to abandon work on his Seventh and Eighth symphonies.

The same problem arose for Spohr as well. In his First Symphony and to some extent in the Second and Third, he stayed with the Eighteenth Century type of movement but in these last two the finale proves somewhat lightweight for the rest of the work. The slower closes of his Fourth and Seventh symphonies are considerably more effective. Spohr's ideal of the classical symphony came closest to fruition in No 5 in C minor, Op 102. As this has the same tonic as Beethoven's great work, it may be of interest to compare the fifth symphonies of the two composers.

Beethoven opens with the challenging first four bars of the *Allegro*, the idea which dominates the symphony and makes such an impression on audiences. Its rhythm and mood sweep the listener onwards in its grim C minor until the horn brings an abrupt change of key and mood to the second subject in E flat. Spohr begins with a slow introduction, *Andante* in C major, with a long theme that rises over a pedal point. All seems serene at first but gradually the music becomes more animated and then the full orchestra bursts in with a powerful *Allegro* theme in C minor. This is extended with considerable impetus, if not quite the energy of Beethoven, but this subsides into several bars of quiet chromatic harmony which form the transition to the second subject in E flat.

In both cases gentle second subjects are soon swept aside by motives from the first section and the expositions end on a strong note, though Spohr is less direct, wandering in harmony and key. Beethoven gives great weight to the development and the coda whereas Spohr's form keeps nearer to Eighteenth Century proportions. The most notable feature of Spohr's development is the appearance of a modified version of the theme from the slow introduction, first as an oboe solo and later played by the first violins. These are beautiful episodes but the thematic working out in the central part is less dramatic than with Beethoven. In both symphonies the recapitulation is regular with only minor modifications such as the moving oboe cadenza in the Beethoven. In his coda Spohr leaves the tonality rather vague until the final bars and the mood is restless and uncertain. Beethoven's coda keeps much more to the home key of C minor and the grim mood of the first subject sweeps all before it.

Both slow movements have a basic key of A flat but they have different functions in their respective works. Beethoven's offers some relaxation after the relentless drive of the first movement and, though it has passages of solemn beauty, grandeur and mystery, it has less emotional weight than the other movements. Spohr, on the other hand, makes the slow movement the heart of the symphony as we find in Bruckner's works. The use of trombones in this movement and the rich harmony help to sustain the elevated tone established in the first few bars.

Beethoven returns to the grim mood of his first movement in his highly original Scherzo in C minor and this is not dispelled by the fugato Trio with its lumbering entries of the basses and cellos which so displeased Spohr. The mysterious atmosphere of the return of the scherzo with its radically altered orchestration and the link passage to the finale are daring strokes of genius. Spohr's own Scherzo in C major is the most cheerful part of his work and was very warmly received when the symphony was first performed in Vienna in 1838. The Trio is a gentle interlude with delicate interweaving of the wind instruments.

The finales are, of course, very different movements but one thing they have in common is the use of thematic references to earlier material. Echoes of the famous opening are found in accompaniment figures in Beethoven's triumphant finale and there is the episode based on Scherzo material. Spohr uses the theme of his first movement's slow introduction as the finale's second subject and this returns in the coda, only to be engulfed by other material. Beethoven's finale is thought to portray an overwhelming victory after a grim struggle earlier. The strong

emphasis on the tonic C major in long passages for full orchestra and the scoring with the addition of trombones and contrabassoon contribute to its effect.

Spohr's finale, a *Presto* in C minor, brings a return of conflict after the calm of the slow movement and the cheerfulness of the Scherzo. Its quick fugato first subject has a restless energy which persists to the end of the movement. It has much greater momentum than can be found in some of Spohr's later music. The coda is comparatively short and, though C major is reached in the very last bars, the mood of restlessness is not really resolved. The ambiguity of this conclusion may leave the listener rather curious but this was evidently how Spohr felt about his life and his work. Many of his later compositions end in such a way but the codas of his operatic overtures show that he could bring a work to a triumphant conclusion when he thought it appropriate.

What then are we to think of Spohr's words criticising Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth symphonies? These have often been quoted out of context with derision, with suggestions that Spohr was a narrow-minded, pompous fool who did not know what he was talking about. Certainly, they were not off-the-cuff opinions published immediately after a first performance. In fact, they appear in the Autobiography which was not published until after Spohr's death and they come from notes in his diary. Spohr had formed these opinions in the course of hearing and conducting the symphonies many times. Let us not forget that many other musicians and critics of the early nineteenth century had reservations about Beethoven's music. The strength and even roughness of some of his works could disturb and offend those who shared Spohr's ideals of formal balance and emotional restraint in music. We must also remember that Spohr always made it clear that Beethoven was one of the greatest of all composers and he continued to perform his works throughout his life, ironically receiving most praise for his interpretation of the Ninth Symphony!

Today the Beethoven symphonies are acknowledged masterpieces but there may still be some music lovers who do not always respond to them, yet would not readily admit this. We can all be the passive receivers of accepted opinions and not admit our genuine responses to music. These vary so much from person to person. Spohr's own music has a very individual quality and can arouse many different responses. Some people would find nothing at all in it to interest them; others could respond warmly to it and find more real enjoyment from it than from many works that are now in the standard repertoire.

Let us remember that at the height of his fame Spohr inspired not just respect and admiration but also deep affection from his public. He was a composer, not a critic, and many creative artists, because of the strength of their own views, have been unable to appreciate fully the achievements of their colleagues. What matters is not what Spohr said about other composers but what he himself achieved.