

NOTES TOWARDS THE PERIOD PERFORMANCE OF SPOHR

by Keith Warsop

THE practice of period performance – the attempt to perform music as closely as possible in the style of the period in which it was composed – has been around for more than a century. At first, though, these attempts were limited to certain dedicated players in special concerts or festivals such as the one run by the Dolmetsch family at Haslemere in Surrey and failed to make an impact on the wider musical world.

This state of affairs began to change during the 1960s and 1970s as skilled specialist ensembles were involved in recordings and broadcasts which won over a substantial part of the general listening public. True, many remained sceptical and the unconverted are still with us but the commercial and artistic success of the period performance movement cannot be denied.

As the 1980s progressed “authentic” performance groups began to move beyond the baroque and earlier eras in which they had specialised to tackle the music of the great Viennese classics, then the romantic era and even early twentieth century composers such as Elgar and Ravel so it is not surprising that Spohr’s music also attracted the movement.

In 1988 a London series of concerts billed as “The Contemporaries of Beethoven” included Spohr’s Second Symphony performed by Roger Norrington’s period orchestra, The London Classical Players, and this interpretation was also broadcast. During the 1990s a couple of CDs appeared featuring Spohr’s music in period performance: the Eighth Violin Concerto on Hyperion (Elizabeth Wallfisch, Brandenburg Orchestra conducted by Roy Goodman) and the First Clarinet Concerto on the Classic FM label (Colin Lawson, Hanover Band, also conducted by Roy Goodman).

Currently Clive Brown’s Leeds-based Luchip ensemble are giving concerts of Spohr’s string chamber music based on the composer’s directions, an Irish harpist is playing the harp music on an eighteenth-century single-action instrument with the scordatura tuning devised by Spohr, and the Hanover Band are planning concerts and recordings of orchestral and choral works to mark the 150th anniversary of the composer’s death which falls in October 2009.

So the question arises as to what exactly constitutes a period performance of Spohr. Is it enough to use early nineteenth-century instruments or copies and follow the general views on playing style at that time? Even if, as Clive Brown is doing, we go back to Spohr himself, do we apply what we have learned to works from all periods of his life?

Let us consider what sources are available to the modern performer which are authentically from Spohr or those close to him. First and most importantly there is Spohr’s *Violinschule* (Haslinger, 1832) which must be studied in detail and not just by period violinists but also by musicians in general for Spohr has much to say on other aspects of the art. Two modern books which make use of Spohr’s violin tutor are by Clive Brown and David Milsom, shown in the appended bibliography. Then there is Spohr’s Autobiography in which he sometimes gives details of the size of the venues in which he performed and also of the forces used. To supplement these, another important source is Spohr’s letters, many of which have been published and which again contain facts about performance conditions and practices. Good secondary sources are the memoirs of those who heard Spohr play or visited him such as Sir George Smart and Edward Holmes to which we can add press reviews of his concerts.

So, putting all this material together we can gain a good idea of how the mature Spohr performed his compositions, whether as violinist or conductor. But that is all it does give us. We should remember that Spohr was before the public for more than half a century in which performing styles changed drastically. Spohr himself was subject to such change. In 1805 the composer Reichardt criticised Spohr for tempo alterations made to heighten the emotional impact of the music. He stated that Spohr changed the tempo completely “whenever a lyrical passage follows a technically difficult section ... it is not merely a gradual slowing down of the motion which is advantageous to beautiful expression and natural for an expressive performance and which can be easily guided back to the original pace of the piece ... rather, it is an exaggeration, a caricature of this beauty. Mr. Spohr changes the tempo completely from the first note of such a passage on and he changes it again in more vivacious difficult passages, depending on the motion of the figurations. Thus, an *Allegro* has three or four different tempi.”

The composer himself admitted the justice of this claim and stated: “Although I was much hurt by such an imputation, to which I was unaccustomed, I was obliged to confess that, yielding to my depth of feeling, I pulled back in the cantabile perhaps too greatly and in the passagework and more impassioned parts, carried away by my youthful fire, I had pushed them on too much. I decided to correct such blemishes without diminishing the force of my expression and by unremitting practice I succeeded.”

So, in an “authentic” performance of an early Spohr work such as the Second Violin Concerto of 1804, the interpreter can follow the young Spohr in significantly adjusting the tempo for the different sections or adopt the method of the more mature Spohr who warned performers that: “My compositions rarely call for any acceleration or retarding of the time for the purpose of enhancing the expression. The interpreter should seldom resort to this means and then only with moderation, even if inner emotion urges him to do so, lest the introduction of a tempo differing entirely from the original mar or destroy the whole character and harmony of the composition.”

At the première of Spohr’s Second Symphony in London in 1820, Thomas Attwood accompanied at the piano while the composer directed as orchestral leader, using his violin bow to beat time. Does a period performance add a Broadwood piano to the ensemble in emulation of that London concert or omit it as would have been the practice in Germany at the time?

Now turn to Spohr’s First Symphony composed in 1811 for the Frankenhäusen Music Festival. It had its première in Gotha on April 25, was played at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on May 20 and then at the Frankenhäusen Festival on July 10. The Gotha orchestra was typical of a small German court, the Gewandhaus one was that appropriate to a large city while at Frankenhäusen the orchestra was enlarged to festival proportions, reported to consist of 106 instrumentalists.

In Milan in September 1816 Spohr gave the première of his Eighth Violin Concerto at La Scala and because of the immense size of the house he had to perform with “a very powerful tone and a grand but simple style of play.” This was certainly of a different order from the New Argyle Rooms in London in 1820 where Spohr made his English debut playing the same concerto.

So we can see that there is no single authenticity. Each concert was a particular event in time, therefore each attempted modern recreation must also be such a single event. Once such a recreation is captured in a recording though, it becomes a repeated experience. As long as recordings make it clear that what we are getting is not absolute authenticity, the way is open for a variety of authenticities in the period performance of Spohr.

Bibliography

- Brown, Clive. *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900* (Oxford, 1999).
Milsom, David. *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance, 1850-1900* (Aldershot, 2003).