

SPOHR AND SCHUMANN

by Keith Warsop

FOR MOST PEOPLE the link between Louis Spohr and Robert Schumann is limited to the latter's negative criticism of the *Historical Symphony*. In fact, the two musicians had a high regard for each other's compositions even though they each sometimes had reservations about particular aspects of certain individual works.

Unfortunately, Spohr broke off his memoirs when he reached June 1838 shortly before he and Schumann met for the first time so we do not have his considered thoughts about Schumann's music in general. However, in the section of the memoirs added by his second wife, Marianne, after Spohr's death, she records that after the stay in Carlsbad detailed by Spohr in the last paragraphs he wrote down himself, they stopped in Leipzig on their way home.

There, Marianne continues, "it was a source of great pleasure to him to make the long-desired acquaintance of Robert Schumann who, though in other respects exceedingly quiet and reserved, yet evinced his admiration of Spohr with great warmth and gratified him by the performance of several of his interesting fantasias."

The two composers had, however, been in touch a few months before through the agency of a third composer, Felix Mendelssohn. On 24th November 1836, Mendelssohn wrote to Spohr requesting a song for inclusion in the wedding album of his new bride, Cécilie Jeanrenaud, and on 13th December wrote again to thank Spohr for the song 'Was mir wohl übrig bliebe', WoO96 (later included by Spohr as No.5 of his Op.139 Lieder collection). Next, on 20th November the following year, Mendelssohn wrote to Schumann suggesting that the song should be published in the latter's journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. Next day Schumann wrote to Spohr asking for the song and five days later Spohr sent it on for publication.

At the time of the 1838 meeting, of course, Schumann was known only as a composer of music for the piano as it was not until 1840 that he devoted himself to writing songs, then in 1841 orchestral works and finally in 1842 chamber music. Choral works lay further in the future. He was also influential as a critic through the pages of his musical journal where he adopted a respectful but not always uncritical tone when dealing with Spohr's compositions.

For instance, while he felt that Spohr's Fourth Symphony, *Die Weihe der Töne*, handled a poem which was unsuitable for musical treatment he continued: "No attack is intended on what is in other respects a musical masterwork."

He also hedged his bets in his review of Spohr's sixth and last *quatuor brillant* in A major, Op.93, where he stated that "forms, modulations and melodic phrases were Spohr's often-heard ones" but went on to note that the work, as always with Spohr, was beautifully finished and the composition masterly so that it provided an excellent example of workmanship for younger composers to follow. His criticisms of the quartet were probably justified as it is filled to overflowing with Spohr's familiar fingerprints though that does not detract from the quality of the music, especially in the catchy and lively finale.

Schumann's most famous review of Spohr is the one we mentioned in our introduction above when he commented on the *Historical Symphony*: "He remains the master as we have always known him and loved him. In fact these forms to which he is not accustomed bring out his individuality even more strongly, just as one with a particularly characteristic bearing reveals himself most clearly when he assumes a disguise. Once Napoleon went to a masked ball; he had been there hardly a moment before, in his well-known attitude, he clasped his arms together. Like a bush fire the cry spread through the hall: 'the Emperor'. Similarly, when this symphony was played one could hear from every corner of the hall the sound 'Spohr' and again 'Spohr' ... "The first three movements were good enough, but the fourth was a complete failure. Such noises might be produced by Auber, Meyerbeer and the like but Spohr should not lend his pen to writing such stuff. Wherever musicians of the first order are spoken of, his name is heard, he is too good for this."

Two major Spohr works which appeared a couple of years after this symphony were nearer to Schumann's heart as his praise was unstinting. Of the First Piano Trio in E minor, Op.119, he wrote: "Although the great master has not composed for these instruments before, he moves freely in this genre with true artistic mastery. The trio is one of the most beautiful flowerings of Spohr's spirit and in which, in addition to the greatest mastery of form, there appear moments of supreme beauty and touches of genius."

He added: "He never tires of lending his works the greatest perfection. Here one should note, for example, how he harmonises the first theme of the first movement anew ... as often as it recurs. A self-satisfied artist would not have taken the trouble and made it the same each time." Schumann's praise for the scherzo was even stronger: "The scherzo is among Spohr's most outstanding compositions; one wants to hear it again and again."

Schumann was similarly ecstatic about the Seventh Symphony in C major, Op.121, the double-symphony *Irdisches und Göttliches im Menschenleben*, stating: "The deep mind of the master now opens itself in the whole of its rich fulness, and speaks to us in the noblest sounds. In an expressive horn solo the composer depicts the laughing rose-time of childhood in the most unaffected manner as if it came accompanied with godly blessings, full of gay, innocent games, so harmless, so cheerful and undisturbed; all is full of variegated dreams as if a happy life of childhood, and mixed with this are the earnest but mild and affectionate smiles of the great master who, by a magical image, has depicted with a joyous melancholy his own childhood – there is indeed in this movement so much heartiness, so much purity of emotion, it wells up with such force from the soul's depths, that through it the creator must become dear and valuable to us ...

"The second movement ... is full of unrest and thoughtfulness, it sounds so troubled, so enticing, so treacherous and yet so full of longing desire – one feels that man has lost himself, that wild passions rage through him and that he eagerly hunts after idle desires which do not satisfy, cannot content him ... The last movement ... depicts mankind still imprisoned in the path of error, the better voice becomes louder and more pressing, till the inward warning sounds again triumphantly, and idle endeavour and struggle find an end in sweet and holy peace. An intention develops itself in music as in poetry; in these compositions of Spohr it dictates itself in the noblest and most emphatic way; therefore honour to the great German master."

Schumann ended with a ringing clarion call: "Let us follow him in art, in life, in all his striving. The industry which is apparent in every line of the score is truly moving. May he stand with our greatest Germans as a shining example."

This close study of Spohr's compositions was about to be returned for in 1842, the year following the completion of Schumann's First Symphony (the *Spring* Symphony), the work was brought to Spohr's attention by his assistant Moritz Hauptmann. As a result, Schumann wrote to Spohr on 23rd November enclosing a manuscript copy of the score in which he had entered some corrections.

He said: "Even before Mr Hauptmann told me of your wish to receive my symphony, it had long been my intention to send you one, requesting your kindly verdict on it. Until now my efforts have been familiar to you only from smaller pieces – may this larger attempt afford you something of interest and enjoyment. I wrote the symphony at the end of winter in 1841, if I may say so, in the midst of that longing for spring which overpowers us even at the ripest age and overtakes us anew every year. I did not wish to depict or paint, but I believe that the period during which the symphony originated affected its formation and how it came to be just as it is. You will not find the symphony easy, but not altogether difficult."

Schumann went on to detail some areas of the score which had caused difficulties to orchestras and made some suggestions on their treatment. He added: "If I have taken the liberty of calling your attention to these passages, most esteemed Sir, it is because the mistakes which have been made in them have been repeated everywhere I have heard the symphony, and because I wished to prepare you specifically for them."

Spohr conducted the symphony in a concert in Kassel on 18th January 1843 and two days later returned the score to Schumann together with a letter in which he said: "The work has also pleased me extraordinarily, and with every rehearsal – I held three very thorough ones – I was more attracted. If I should sketch more exactly my opinion of what I found particularly beautiful, it is first of all the

magnificent development of the thematic figure at the beginning, but secondly, then, the whole scherzo with its distinctive, charming close, and the vigour and originality of the last movement.

“If I might allow myself to take exception, it would be first of all to the connection between the *Adagio* and Scherzo, for which I could discover no reason; furthermore there are too many blatant accompanimental figures in the *adagio* which envelop the cantilena too much (which appears idiomatic to me as being by a player of and composer for piano), and finally a phrase in the last *allegro* which begins with the tenor trombone solo, p.172, and does not harmonise with the character of the rest, and therefore probably led to the retransition for horns and solo flute, which also does not seem quite symphonic to me. But these are just my views, and my intuition can perhaps be mistaken.”

Despite these criticisms – and Schumann did later revise the passage involving the tenor trombone so he must have found this one at least to be valid – Spohr’s letter was considered something of which to be proud and so found a place in a special Schumann family album.

One wonders whether Schumann’s reference in his letter about the genesis of his symphony “in the midst of that longing for spring which overpowers us even at the ripest age” came back to Spohr’s mind seven years later. It was on 22nd January 1850 when, after a heavy overnight frost, the 65-year-old composer slipped and fell on the ice, suffering severe concussion which laid him up for several weeks.

It was during his illness that the plan for his *Seasons* Symphony, which had occurred to him shortly before his accident, much occupied his mind and haunted him during long sleepless and feverish nights. It is tempting to imagine that Schumann’s words about the longing for spring had some influence on the shape of Spohr’s new symphony for the sequence of movements he adopted highlights this longing.

Unlike all other composers of works depicting the seasons, Spohr starts his symphony in the depths of winter before making the transition to spring. Conventionally, compositions on the seasons follow the sequence of the year from spring to winter as witness Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* violin concertos, Domenico Scarlatti’s serenata, Haydn’s oratorio, Raff’s cycle of symphonies and Glazunov’s ballet among others.

A further important encounter with Schumann’s music became possible for Spohr during his summer vacation in 1850 – a few months after completing his *Seasons* Symphony. Marianne tells the story of how Spohr stopped off in Leipzig on his way to fulfil a promise to visit Breslau “in the hope of hearing Schumann’s new opera of *Genoveva* but, to his great regret, upon his arrival there he was informed of the delays that had intervened to defer its performance and was obliged to content himself with attending several rehearsals.

“Although by no means an admirer of the compositions of Schumann so far known to him in which he had frequently found a want of euphony and melodious breadth of harmonies, he formed a very favourable opinion of the opera and it especially pleased him to observe that the same method of treatment which he had resorted to in the composition of *The Crusaders* had been followed, in that Schumann did not permit the unnatural interruption of the action by a wearisome and constant repetition of the words.

“It was no less interesting to Spohr to become acquainted with some of his larger piano compositions, the desired opportunity for which was afforded him at the musical parties given to him, at which Mrs Clara Schumann played a trio and piano concerto of her husband’s with the most finished excellence.”

Marianne’s comment above about Spohr’s lack of admiration for Schumann’s compositions does not square with his own praise for the *Spring* Symphony; perhaps she had assumed that criticism by Spohr of some aspects of Schumann’s works applied more generally. Finally, if we ask whether the two composers influenced each other in any way, we notice that Schumann always remarked on and praised Spohr’s masterly workmanship. One can see that he tried to apply this lesson to his own works which he continuously revised and polished over the years, the prime example being the Fourth Symphony whose final version of 1851 differs significantly from the original one of ten years earlier.

One Spohr facet which seems to have been picked up by Schumann was the attraction for dotted rhythms which appear regularly in both of their compositions. The source for this device would appear to be the French revolutionary operas of Cherubini which Spohr knew well and deeply admired.

Schumann might also have been influenced by Spohr’s *Seasons* Symphony when he came to compose his *Fest-ouverture*, Op.123, in 1853, for both works quote the popular Rheinweinlied ‘Bekränzt mit Laub den lieben vollen Becher’ from J.A.P.Schulze’s collection *Lieder im Volkston*. Schumann ambitiously brought in a tenor and chorus to present this melody, thus ensuring that, for economic reasons, it is never

performed or recorded though in 2010 the 200th anniversary celebrations of Schumann's birth might bring it back to life temporarily:

For Spohr, his knowledge of Schumann's piano works of the 1830s possibly helped him to steer away from the more flashy piano style of keyboard composers such as Field, Hummel or Moscheles in his own later piano trios, sonata, quintet and septet composed between 1841 and 1853 in contrast to his much earlier Piano and Wind Quintet of 1820.

There is also the role which Schumann's Piano Quintet, Op.44, played in Spohr's turning to the genre. The work was composed during Schumann's "chamber music year" of 1842 and received its première at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 8th January 1843. Apart from Schubert's *Trout* Quintet which includes a double-bass, it was the first piano quintet with what has become the standard line-up of two violins, viola and cello to achieve success and enter the chamber music repertory

Following the success of Spohr's First Piano Trio of 1841 which was issued the following year, his publisher Schuberth suggested the composer might like to write a Piano Quartet. Instead, Spohr kept Schuberth satisfied with his Piano Quintet, Op.130, which he composed during August and September 1845 and this work followed Schumann's in receiving a performance at the Leipzig Gewandhaus some three years later on 31st March 1846. It was published by Schuberth during that same year.

The orchestral style of Schumann as well as that of Mendelssohn may also have had an impact on Spohr's orchestration in his Eighth and Ninth symphonies, composed between 1847 and 1850, which have less of the chamber-like filigree writing found at times in the first seven though it is noticeable that when Spohr came to write his Tenth in 1857 he did return to this earlier method of orchestration to a greater degree.

So we can see that our knowledge of the interaction between Spohr and Schumann is far greater than one single review of the *Historical* Symphony.

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