

SPOHR AND THE ART OF ALLUSION

by Keith Warsop

THERE IS A long history to the art of musical allusion. Medieval and Renaissance composers based some of their masses on pre-existing works by other musicians – the so-called Parody Mass – while the ‘In Nomine’ section of John Taverner’s *Missa Gloria Tibi Trinitas* inspired and gave its name to a long series of polyphonic instrumental pieces by composers such as William Byrd, Orlando Gibbons and Henry Purcell. Mozart famously alluded to a popular aria from *Una cosa rara* by Vicente Martin y Soler as well as his own ‘Non più andrai’ from *The Marriage of Figaro* in the supper scene in *Don Giovanni*.

The cult of allusion is also associated particularly with more recent composers from Stravinsky and Charles Ives right up to our own times. The opening motif of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony makes two well-known appearances, in Manuel de Falla’s ballet *The Three-Cornered Hat* and in Bohuslav Martinů’s *Lidice Memorial*.

So Spohr was by no means an innovator in his allusions to music by other composers but can be seen as part of the historical mainstream. The most formal strand of musical allusion is the variations on a theme to which in Spohr’s case can be added his potpourris.

His first work to follow this path was the Potpourri in G major, Op.5, for solo violin and string trio, composed in 1804, which contains variations on an aria from *Le petit matelot ou le mariage impromptu* by the French composer Pierre Gaveaux. A year later came two sets of variations for the same ensemble (opp.6 and 8) which Spohr stated in a letter to his publisher, Ambrosius Kühnel, were on themes by Haydn¹. However, no one has ever been able to discover these themes in any Haydn work so perhaps Spohr took them from the many spurious pieces attributed to the Viennese master.

In 1807 Spohr turned again to French opera for his solo harp Variations in F major, Op.36, where the theme is from *Un folie* by Etienne Méhul. The same year Mozart contributed themes to a couple of potpourris. In the B flat work, Op.22, for solo violin, string quartet and optional double-bass, ‘Là ci darem la mano’ from *Don Giovanni* shares the honours with a Russian air previously used by Paul Wranitzky in his D major Symphony, Op.36, while in the G major potpourri, Op.23, ‘Wer ein Liebchen hat Gefunden’ from *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and a theme of Spohr’s own were combined contrapuntally.

The following year Spohr looked to Mozart again for his Potpourri in B major, Op.24, for solo violin and string trio, this time using Pedrillo’s Serenade from *Die Entführung* and ‘Batti, batti’ from *Don Giovanni*, though when he arranged the work for violin and piano in 1816 he substituted ‘Voi, che sapete’ from *Figaro* for ‘Batti, batti’.

The 1811 Potpourri in F major, Op.80, for clarinet and orchestra, used two themes from Peter von Winter’s opera *Das unterbrochene Opferfest* while the second movement of the Sonata in D major, Op.114, for violin and harp, also from 1811, was a potpourri on themes from Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*.

In Vienna, Spohr composed his Octet in E major, Op.32, in 1814 with a third movement comprising variations on Handel’s ‘Harmonious Blacksmith’ following a suggestion by his patron, Johann Tost, who was planning a business trip to England and thought the Handel link would help the work to catch on there. However, Tost’s finances failed and the English journey never took place.

Later the same year Spohr wrote a Potpourri in B minor, Op.118, for violin and harp which

treated a theme from the opera *Castor und Pollux* by Abbé Vogler and one attributed to Franz Danzi though Clive Brown has shown that Danzi himself took this theme from an insertion aria by Franz Süssmayr, the Mozart pupil who completed his teacher's unfinished Requiem². The clarinettist, Simon Hermstedt, liked this composition so much that he begged Spohr to prepare a version for his own instrument which the composer duly did though he recast it thoroughly by scrapping the Vogler material entirely and so producing the *Fantasie and Variations on a Theme of Danzi*, Op.81.

Spohr's final use of outside sources for variations came in London in the summer of 1820. For his benefit concert Spohr paid tribute to his hosts with his newly-composed *Potpourri on Irish Melodies*, Op.59, for violin and orchestra. The three themes were taken from *A Selection of Irish Melodies* of 1808, accompaniments by Sir John Stevenson and words by Thomas Moore. The first is the tune 'Non Bonin Shin Doe' (Moore's verses: 'They may reil at this life from the hour I began it'), then comes 'The Girl I Left Behind Me' (Moore: 'As slow our ship her foamy track against the wind was cleaving'), and finally 'Fague a Ballagh' (Moore: 'To ladies' eyes a round Boy, we can't refuse, we can't refuse').

From this point on, Spohr's variations and potpourris used only material from his own works or were specifically composed for the piece in hand.

The next strand of allusion relates to a definitely acknowledged quotation in a work, usually placed there for a programmatic purpose though the earliest and most mysterious of this group carries no explanation from the composer and nothing in the score to indicate any allusion is being made to Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. We refer to the slow movement of Spohr's *Violin Concerto No.2 in D minor*, Op.2, written in the summer of 1804.

Hartmut Becker has pointed out that in 1926 the German scholar Hans Joachim Moser noticed two quotations from the Bach passion in the central section of the *Adagio* relating to the arias No.35 'Geduld, Geduld, wenn mich falsche Zungen stehen' and No.57 'Komm, süßes Kreuz', adding that Spohr also has the violin cite the closing chorus 'Ruhe sanfte, sanfte ruh'.

Becker's theory is that Spohr inserted these Bach references as a tribute to Johann Gottfried Schwanberger who had died on Spohr's twentieth birthday, April 5, 1804, at the age of 66. Schwanberger was the Brunswick court music director and his father had studied with Johann Sebastian Bach while Schwanberger himself was a personal friend of Carl Philip Emanuel Bach. Furthermore Schwanberger had links with Spohr's own family as he had given music lessons to Spohr's mother³.

Next we have another violin concerto, No.6 in G minor, Op.28, composed in 1809, with a finale marked *Alla Spagnola*. Spohr says in his memoirs that the themes were genuine Spanish ones which he noted down from a Spanish soldier from Napoleon's army who had been billeted with him after the battle of Jena. The soldier sang the melodies while accompanying himself on a guitar and Spohr wove the sound of the instrument into his concerto by having the violins play pizzicato and col legno⁴.

Spohr later used such finales in his *String Quartet in A minor*, Op.58, No.2 (1821) and *Clarinet Concerto No.4 in E minor*, WoO 20 (1828/29) as well as writing a *Rondo alla Spagnuola* in C major, Op.111 (1839) for violin and piano. However, in these cases the themes appear to be his own though written in the style of the ones in his 1809 violin concerto. In his 1830 opera *Der Alchymist* Spohr also introduced an orchestral version of the string quartet finale complete with castanets and entitled *Fandango*.

The *Adagio* of the *Clarinet Concerto No.3 in F minor*, WoO 19, composed in 1821, has some Mozartian resemblances. In fact clarinettist John Denman has said that the movement "provides what I consider to be a direct quotation from Mozart; it is neither the Mozart clarinet concerto

melody, nor that of the quintet but rather a mixture of both”⁵. He goes on to ask: “Was Spohr having a friendly joke with his clarinettist?” for Hermstedt loved these Mozart works above all others.

The quotation of an old German song in the Trio of the Festmarsch in D major WoO 3 is less arguable as Spohr himself has told us all about it. He says that he “received the command from the Elector to write a new opera to celebrate the marriage of his daughter, the Princess Marie, with the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, which was to take place in the spring of 1825.” Spohr continues: “I had besides to compose a grand march with introduction of the melody of the old German ballad ‘Und als der Großvater die Großmutter nahm’ together with a torchlight dance for 53 trumpeters and two pair of kettle-drummers.”

On the day of the wedding “on the procession of the new-married pair and their suite from the dining-hall to the white saloon, the orchestra played my march, which had a good effect, and at the part where the ‘Großvater-Lied’ was introduced was very pretty. The Elector and the Duke (who was decidedly more musical than his father-in-law) both congratulated me much upon the grand march which, at their request, was played a second time.”⁶

The *Larghetto con moto* of the String Quartet in A minor, Op.74, No.1, which dates from 1826, is claimed by Hans Glenewinkel in his 1912 study of Spohr’s string chamber music to bear a fatal resemblance to Haydn’s *Emperor’s Hymn* though others have found the theme to be some distance from Haydn’s and certainly not close enough to mar the listener’s enjoyment⁷. If Spohr did mean such a Haydn reference, perhaps it was also a friendly joke with his fellow quartet players, especially if the Haydn quartet which includes the theme was being performed in the same programme.

In 1832 Spohr turned to the programme symphony with his *Die Weihe der Töne* (Symphony No.4 in F major, Op.86) and marked two quotations in the score. The third movement depicts the sounds of warfare with an army marching into battle and then, as victory is celebrated with a chorale, Spohr notes ‘Ambrosianischer Lobgesang’ while in the finale funeral music is introduced with another chorale ‘Begrabt den Leib’. Folker Göthel has noted that Spohr obtained these from the *Kasseler Gesangsbuch* of 1828 and that Klopstock’s ‘Begrabt den Leib in seine Gruft’ used the 1544 melody ‘Nun laßt uns den Leib begraben’ by Georg Rhaus Kantional⁸.

Spohr’s 1836 holiday with family and friends to Dresden and the nearby picturesque countryside known as ‘the Saxon Switzerland’ resulted in a musical souvenir, *Nachklänge einer Reise nach Dresden und in die Sächsische Schweiz* (Reminiscences of a journey to Dresden and through Saxon Switzerland), alias the Duo Concertante No.2 in F major, Op.96, for violin and piano. The second movement Scherzo is called ‘Reise’ and Spohr says that in it he tried to describe the journey itself “by introducing the winding of the postillions’ horns customary in Saxony and the neighbouring part of Prussia ... played by the violin upon the G string in a horn-like manner as chief theme.”⁹

With the *Historical Symphony* of 1839 (Symphony No.6 in G major, Op.116) there are no actual quotations from the composers named in the movement headings but ‘Bach-Handel’ offers pastiches which recall Bach’s C major fugue from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* Book One and a general atmosphere resembling the *Pastoral Symphony* from Handel’s *Messiah* together with a more specific affinity with that oratorio’s duet ‘He shall feed his flock like a shepherd’.

In the Haydn-Mozart slow movement the main models are a figure from Mozart’s Symphony No.39 in E flat major, K.543, and another from Symphony No.38 in D major, K.504, while the Haydn link is covered with a slight resemblance of the opening theme to the one from the *Adagio* of Symphony No.87 in A major.

As the curtain rises in Spohr’s final opera *Die Kreuzfahrer* (1843/44) the chorus sings a

melody Spohr notes as an 'Altdeutsches Soldatenlied'. Wolfram Boder suggests that Spohr probably took this melody from Johann Gottfried Herder's 1779 published collection of folksongs or from the first volume of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, published in 1806/08 by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano¹⁰.

In the finale of his Symphony No.9 in B minor, Op.143 *The Seasons*, composed in 1850, Spohr portrays autumn and quotes the *Rheinweinielied* 'Bekränzt mit Laub den lieben vollen Becher' from Johann Abraham Peter Schulz's *Lieder im Volkston*, published in 1782.

The final strand of Spohr's allusions covers the area where he used existing works by other composers as models for his own. In writing about the overture to his 1808 opera *Alruna*, Spohr refers to its resemblance to Mozart's *Zauberflöte* overture and tells us that one critic noted "it is not free from reminiscences".

Spohr adds: "He might have said right out, it is an exact imitation of the overture to the *Zauberflöte*; for that was the object I had in view. In my admiration of Mozart and the feeling of wonder with which I regarded that overture, an imitation of it seemed to me something very natural and praiseworthy, and at the time when I sought to develop my talent for composition I had made many similar imitations of Mozart's masterpieces, and among others that of the aria full of love-complaints in *Alruna*, imitated from the beautiful aria of Pamina 'Ach, ich fühl's, es ist verschwunden'¹¹. It was this *Alruna* aria, sung by Bertha, which Spohr later reworked as the *Adagio* of his Notturmo in C major, Op.34, for wind and percussion composed in 1815.

Other early works where we can notice such imitations include the Violin Concerto No.1 in A major, Op.1 (1802/03) which clearly has Viotti's Violin Concerto No.13 in A major (c1786) as the model. In the slow movement of the String Quartet in G minor, Op.4, No.2 (1804/05) the correspondence is with Mozart's Quartet in C major, K.465 while the *Quatuor brillant* in D minor, Op.11 (1806) is related again to Mozart, for as Hans Glenewinkel points out: "The theme is a clear copy of the aria 'Il mio tesoro intante' from *Don Giovanni*'"¹².

A section of imitation in the first movement of Spohr's Clarinet Concerto No.1 in C minor, Op.26, written in 1808, could almost have been cribbed from Haydn's Symphony No.95 in the same key while the first movement of the Symphony No.1 in E flat major, Op.20, from 1811, immediately brings to mind Mozart's great E flat symphony K.543.

In later works such models disappear and even when Spohr composed something in emulation of music which inspired him to aspire to do something similar, his own personal style keeps the original composer at bay. Two examples are his *a cappella* Mass in C minor, Op.54, written in 1821 after studying Palestrina and his contemporaries, and the 1833 waltz *Erinnerung an Marienbad*, Op.89, which Spohr expressly states was due to his inclination to try every sort composition and in this case to write a waltz *à la Strauss*. But as he reluctantly admitted "afterwards I found it wanting in that freshness and originality which distinguish most of the waltzes of Strauss and Lanner."¹³

One composer is conspicuous by his absence from this survey of Spohr and the art of allusion and that is Beethoven, perhaps surprisingly in view of the 'Age of Beethoven' Scherzo in the *Historical Symphony* but there Spohr's main nod to the Viennese giant comes in his use of the timpani.

The Scherzo of Spohr's Symphony No.3 in C minor, Op.78, certainly starts with what might be a hint of the Scherzo from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, a movement Spohr greatly admired. In addition, the Third was composed at the start of 1828 only months after Beethoven's death in March 1827 so we might suggest a memorial tribute here but this is pure speculation.

A much later possible link with the Beethoven Scherzo turns up in Spohr's String Sextet in C major, Op.140, dating from 1848. Here Spohr links his Scherzo and finale through the use of

the same figure to launch both movements and then brings back the Scherzo at the close of the finale's exposition.

This reminds us of what Spohr said about the Scherzo of Beethoven's Fifth and its return in the finale: "The return of the Scherzo in the finale is so happy an idea that the composer may be envied for it. Its effect is most captivating!"¹⁴ However, Spohr goes one further than Beethoven by bringing back the Scherzo yet again in the finale's coda. Just when we wonder how often the two movements are going to alternate, the finale's main motif ends proceedings exhilaratingly as the tempo speeds up to *Prestissimo*.

Hans Glenewinkel also finds that both first movement themes in Spohr's String Quartet in B flat major, Op.74, No.2 (1826) are developed from the Rondo of Beethoven's Piano Sonata, Op.22, in the same key¹⁵.

Maybe about this period Spohr was re-examining Beethoven's works and some influence was sub-consciously transmitted. The fact that Spohr conducted Beethoven's Choral Symphony for the first time in the Easter Sunday 1828 concert at which he also premiered his own Third shows that Beethoven was not far away from his mind at this time.

Notes

1. Wulforst, Martin. *Louis Spohr's Early Chamber Music (1796-1812): A Contribution to the History of Nineteenth-century Genres* (dissertation, City University of New York, 1995), p.327.
2. Brown, Clive. *Variations on a Theme of 'Danzi'*, Spohr Journal 18, autumn 1991, pp.11-13.
3. Becker, Hartmut. Booklet notes to compact disc recording CPO999067-2, Violin Concertos 2 and 5 (1993), pp.26-27.
4. *Louis Spohr's Autobiography* (English translation, London, 1865, two volumes bound in one), vol.1, p.124.
5. Denman, John. *My Life with Louis. Reflections of a Spohr Clarinettist*. Spohr Journal 22, autumn 1995, p.8.
6. Spohr. *Op.cit./vol.2*, pp.155 and 157.
7. Glenewinkel, Hans. *Spohrs Kammermusik für Streichinstrumente. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Streichquartetts im XIX. Jahrhundert*. (dissertation, Munich, 1912), p.60.
8. Göthel, Folker. *Thematisch-Bibliographisches Verzeichnis der Werke von Louis Spohr* (Tutzing, 1981) p.148.
9. Spohr. *Op.cit./vol.2*, pp.200-201.
10. Boder, Wolfram. *Senility or the Wisdom of Age? Studies in Spohr's 'Crusaders'*. Spohr Journal 29, winter 2002, p.9.
11. Spohr. *Op.cit./vol.1*, p.130.
12. Glenewinkel. *Op.cit.*, p.26.
13. Spohr. *Op.cit./vol.2*, p.185.
14. Spohr. *Op.cit./vol.1*, p.214.
15. Glenewinkel. *Op.cit.*, p.60.