

SPOHR'S OPUS 58 STRING QUARTETS

by Christopher Tutt

HOW IMPORTANT are the string quartets in Spohr's output? We must be grateful to the Marco Polo label for persevering with its project to record all of the quartets including the last two which remained unpublished until this century. With recent releases in the series after a long gap we are now within sight of the completion of the cycle. However, there are still hardly any live performances of them. Most established quartet groups don't want to know even though the CDs show that some of the works are fully the equals of compositions like the Nonet, Octet, First Double Quartet, Sextet and Quintet for Piano and Winds which do get live performances. In fact it is in the quartets that Spohr's most profound utterances are to be found.

With the issue in 2009 of a CD which included the quartet in G major, Op.58/3, we can more easily judge the set of three written in 1821/22 and published as Op.58. These were composed when Spohr was at the height of his powers, just as he made the move to Kassel where he lived for the rest of his life. Soon afterwards he completed his most successful opera, *Jessonda*, which confirmed his standing as a leading composer in Germany.

It is worth looking at this group of three quartets, all of which, in my opinion, should be in the general repertoire. The reasons often given for the current neglect of Spohr's quartets are that the first violin part is too prominent, there is not enough variety in them, they are lightweight, the harmony is too rich and cloying and they often lack rhythmic energy. Examples can be found in some of the 36 quartets of all these features but this does not mean that there are not a number of masterpieces of the genre among them.

If we consider the question of Spohr's virtuoso writing for the first violin in his chamber works, we have to decide whether the principle of equality in a string quartet should override judgments about the overall quality of the music. His first 'solo' quartet, Op.11 in D minor, was openly acknowledged as a work in the tradition of Rode with a clear predominance of the first violin. In its construction and the quality of the overall string writing it already shows Spohr's mastery and is a most attractive work with plenty of vigour. So, should it matter how much balance there is in the material for each of the four instruments? Isn't there a place for chamber works which highlight the virtuosity of one of the ensemble while giving worthwhile parts for the others? Weber's clarinet quintet springs to mind as an obvious example. Spohr was a great virtuoso and it was natural that this should come out in chamber works written in the first place for his own performance with colleagues. A good example of how this works at its best is the recorded performance of the First Double Quartet with Jascha Heifetz leading a group of distinguished string players. In Spohr's published groups of three quartets, we find that often one of the group has a greater element of virtuoso writing for the first violin than the other two. One can also find brilliant writing for the first violin in places in the quartets of Haydn and Mendelssohn.

It is true that in some of the later works by Spohr there are reminiscences of themes and harmonic sequences from previous works, but if we consider his earlier groups of string quartets, not least Opus 58, we can find a distinct character to each work with plenty of original features. There is considerable warmth and good humour as in Haydn, but a darker side comes out in such movements as the slow one of Op.82/2 or the first in Op.84/1. The rich harmony is in most cases part of the overall construction and appropriate to its context. It is often the fault of cautious performers that the rhythms can seem sluggish, something Spohr himself warned about in his

frequent injunctions that his faster music must not be dragged. The true worth of the best of these quartets can only be properly judged when several leading ensembles have given us their own interpretations of them. In this respect, see also the article in the 2009 *Spohr Journal* 'A Conspectus of the Recordings of Spohr's Symphonies' by Martin Pulbrook.

In the Opus 58 set there is a different layout of movements in each of the three quartets. No.1 in E flat major has the traditional layout with the slow movement second and the Scherzo third. In No.2 in A minor we apparently have just three movements with a set of variations coming second. However, this contains a section with a change of key and time signature marked Scherzo before returning to the original theme and tempo. No.3 in G major has a merger of the slow movement and finale with a minuet in second place. In No.1 the first violin has a dominant role without the work appearing to be a display piece whereas in No.2 there are brilliant passages for the first violin. No.3 has fuller parts for the other instruments with the first violin only shining in the quicker sections of the last movement.

It is often said that Spohr had a rigid plan for works in sonata form without the flexibility found in the great classical masters. There is a grain of truth in this but in the works we are discussing there are considerable differences in how the first movements are worked out.

In No.1 the opening theme and parts of it dominate the movement as a whole and the second subject is a variant of the first. The bridge passage to it is a more vigorous extension of the first theme with subsidiary figures and changes of key. The continuation of the second theme does bring in a passage of triplets played by the first violin ending in a trill but the codetta extends the triplets with participation by other instruments. The triplets continue into the development, passing from the first violin to the second, then to the cello to reach a fortissimo section in E major based on the opening theme. This is an excellent example of how Spohr integrates what are at first sight virtuoso elements into the general musical argument. There are some changes in the recapitulation and the movement comes to a quiet end. The general mood is of cheerful confidence with some sterner moments and there is plenty of rhythmic vitality.

In No.2 there are brilliant passages for the first violin between the first and second subjects and between the second subject and the codetta. The opening theme has a yearning quality as in such works as the Op.11 'solo' quartet mentioned earlier, but with a more expansive romantic feeling to it. The second subject is quite distinct with plenty of confidence, repeated on the cello moving seamlessly into a virtuoso passage ending in a trill. The development handles the first theme ingeniously in combination with some of the passage work and leads up to a strong prelude to a *pianissimo* return of the main subject in the home key. As in No.1, there is a quiet ending to the movement in the major key. Again there are lively rhythms and a logical progression of ideas.

We find in No.3 that there is much more sharing of music material between the four instruments and little that can be regarded as virtuoso writing. The other two first movements have the usual repeat of the exposition but this is omitted here. There is a strong contrast between the two main themes. The first subject has an easy-going, cheerful air to it until the cello brings in a sudden change from G major to E minor and a disturbed passage with restless modulations and harmonies until at last the key of D major is reached with a soaring, confident second theme. The mood darkens again and all the instruments have their share in the transitional passages which lead without an obvious break to the development. This sheds a fresh light on each of the main themes in turn. The recapitulation has several changes and leads again to a quiet close. The effect is of a sense of comfortable well-being which has been threatened by dark forces but has been restored for the time being at the close of the movement.

Only the E flat quartet has a full-scale slow movement and this is one of Spohr's finest. Its

solemn, hymn-like main theme establishes a mood of sustained contemplation which is not broken by a more animated section. The vigorous Scherzo provides a strong contrast and the lively finale with plenty of contrapuntal writing sinks to *ppp* before ending with loud chords. The work as a whole has a strong claim to a place alongside the acknowledged masterpieces of early nineteenth century string quartet writing.

In the A minor quartet, the second movement could be regarded as just a set of variations in F with a long episode in a different key and time signature before finishing in the original key. However, the episode is marked and has the feel of a Scherzo so Spohr obviously intended a merger of the normal two middle movements here. This integration is effected by the Scherzo theme being adapted from the one used in the variations. The first violin certainly has great prominence here but there is plenty going on in the other parts too. The same is true of the final *Rondo all'Espagnola* which should be a lively and convincing conclusion if played with sufficient conviction. There is much for the listener to enjoy in this quartet.

In the first two quartets there were scherzos with a full-scale example with contrasting trio in No.1 and a lively scherzo-like interlude in the variations movement in No.2. In the third quartet in the group, the corresponding movement is marked *Menuetto* but does not have the character of a stately dance. There is a quirky, even slightly sinister, feel to it even though it is broadly in a major key (E flat). This mood is intensified in the trio which is in C minor and has interpolations of bars in 2/4 time. Spohr then goes straight on to his combined slow movement and finale. This is obviously influenced by the finale of Beethoven's Op.18/6 in B flat major which was in the group of quartets that were particular favourites of Spohr's. Beethoven has the usual slow movement, quite easy-going in character, in second place but then the finale begins with a sinister *Adagio* with the heading 'La Malincolia', a foretaste of the darker, more powerful side of his music. This suddenly changes to a cheerful *Allegretto quasi Allegro* which recalls the typical Haydn finale. However, there is a reappearance of the *Adagio* in the middle of the main section but the cheerful melodies return and the quartet comes to a bright conclusion. Spohr begins his movement *Adagio molto* with a brooding theme in G minor on the viola, then later on the cello. The mood suddenly changes with a jaunty melody, *Allegro*, introduced by the first violin but the opening theme returns as a second subject, sometimes slowing down again, but also appearing with lively counter-melodies. The slow theme keeps returning and forms the concluding section of the work in G minor. Perhaps Spohr was also familiar with Haydn's C major quartet Op.54/2 whose finale starts *Adagio*, is then interrupted by a vivacious *Presto* but returns to the slow music for its conclusion.

To sum up, these three quartets have each a distinct character and something to communicate to an audience. The first has much to appeal to listeners who have got to know and enjoy the Nonet, plenty of humour and self-confidence plus a beautiful slow movement with the German quality of *Innigkeit*. The second has good examples of Spohr's 'elegiac melancholy', virtuoso string writing and good contrasts. The third starts with an easy-going, contented air which is then undermined by restless rhythms and harmonies. The same positive feelings as at the start return in the quicker sections of the final movement. However, unlike the final resolutions in each of the conflicts in Spohr's fifth, seventh and ninth symphonies, the darker mood prevails in its *Adagio* conclusion. In its own distinct way this quartet has just as much claim to be considered a masterpiece as the first one in the group.

Discography

The first two quartets were composed in November and December 1821 in Dresden; the third was begun in December 1821 in Dresden and completed in February and March 1822 in Kassel.

Marco Polo 8.223256

New Budapest Quartet (András Kiss, violin 1; Ferenc Balogh, violin 2; László Bársony, viola; Károly Botvay, cello). Recorded: Budapest, March 1-3, 1991; released 1992.

Op.58, No.1 in E flat major

1. Allegro vivace (E flat major)	8.59
2. Adagio (A flat major)	10.44
3. Scherzo (C minor) and Trio (C major)	5.17
4. Rondo: Vivace (E flat major)	6.46
Total time	31.46

Op.58, No.2 in A minor

1. Moderato (A minor)	10.53
2. Andante con Variazioni (F major)	5.21
Scherzo: Vivace (A major)	4.26
3. Rondo all'Espagnola (A minor)	6.38
Total time	27.18

Marco Polo 8.225315

Moscow Philharmonic Concertino Quartet (Jaroslav Krasnikov, violin 1; Sofia Krasnikova, violin 2; Olga Zhmaeva, viola; Victor Kozodov, cello). Recorded: Moscow, November 10, 2007 to January 17, 2008; released 2009.

Op.58, No.3 in G major

1. Allegro (G major)	8.07
2. Menuetto: Moderato (E flat major) and Trio (C minor)	5.37
3. Adagio (G minor)	1.42
Allegro (G major)	6.20
Total time	21.46

(coupled with Quartet in F minor, Op.29, No.3).