

SPOHR'S TENTH SYMPHONY

by Bert Hagels

We are grateful to the author and his publishers, Musikverlag Ries & Erler of Berlin, for giving permission for this translation to be published here. The German original forms the introduction to the score of the Tenth Symphony which is part of a critical edition of all the Spohr symphonies and concert overtures being edited by Bert Hagels. The translator, Professor Peter Skrine, has abridged the original slightly by omitting a passage of detailed technical harmonic analysis, shown here by [...]

The composition of the symphony and its place in Spohr's output

LOUIS SPOHR wrote his last symphony, the Tenth, at the start of 1857 and the final page of the autograph score is dated 'Cassel, April 1857'. It was composed between two string quartets, both of which were intended to be his 34th; but Spohr rejected them both and gave instructions that neither of them was ever to be made available to the public¹. In the autobiography, edited by his second wife, Marianne, we read:

"He also passed similar judgment on a symphony composed shortly before and which was performed just once in a rehearsal by the Kassel court orchestra in the presence only of some close musical friends of his. Despite the many beauties and new ideas it contained, it did not seem to him worthy of bringing to an end the impressive sequence of symphonies he had composed in earlier years; thus it came about that this tenth symphony was condemned by Spohr himself to eternal oblivion if not to destruction."

Six months after Spohr's death Marianne confirmed the composer's wishes in a letter dated 1 May 1860:

"The works Spohr himself declared to be 'unequal to his other compositions and therefore not to be published' are, apart from some juvenilia, quartet No.34, symphony No.10, a salon piece for violin and piano and a more or less half-completed requiem."²

Spohr did not include the symphony in his 'personal catalogue of works', nor does it appear in the first published catalogue of them by Hans Michael Schletterer which is based on it. In a letter to his friend, Wilhelm Speyer, dated 27 November 1857, Spohr himself refers to a request for a symphony but makes no mention of the one he had completed six months before:

"I recently received a request from the Philharmonic Society in London to write a symphony or other large-scale orchestral work for next season. I turned the request down because, though I have recently written some quartets worthy of my previous ones, I do not feel myself able to write a symphony capable of being placed alongside my earlier ones, from my second symphony onwards. I must also take care not to sink in the estimation of the English in particular."³

The composer says much the same a few days later when, on 4 December 1857, he tells his pupil Jean Joseph Bott that he has received a letter from the London Philharmonic Society "in which they commission me to write a new symphony for this year's season", and that he has declined to do so "because I no longer feel that I can write one which would be the equal of my others from No.2 on."⁴

The symphony was mentioned among Spohr's posthumous works after it had found its way into the published bibliography of these compositions published by Folker Göthel in 1981; here it was given the number WoO 8. Before he rejected the work, Spohr probably intended it to be

his Op.156⁵. In his 1956 dissertation *The Symphonies of Ludwig Spohr*, Horst Heussner provided a brief description of the autograph score.

Spohr's negative judgment of his last major orchestral work is shared by later writers. Heussner regards it as his "weakest symphony" and claims that the "overall impression it makes, especially as regards melodic and thematic structure, is that it lacks all profundity". More recent studies of Spohr's life and work and of the symphonic genre in which Spohr is discussed for his own sake tend merely to mention the work in passing. In his entry on Spohr in the *New Grove* (2001), Clive Brown comes to the conclusion that, whereas the eighth and ninth symphonies reveal Spohr's undiminished compositional skill but declining inspiration, the tenth had brought home to him that he had "threshed an empty husk".

We can only speculate about the musical grounds for its rejection which go well beyond sweeping statements about 'declining inventiveness' and so on. In fact Spohr himself seems to have been in two minds about his own judgment: he would otherwise have destroyed the completed score and any copies of it.

This is not the place to embark on a comprehensive aesthetic evaluation of the work. It is, however, highly probable that, considering Spohr's increasingly evident self-critical awareness, the fact that his two previous symphonies (No.8 in G major, Op.137, and No.9 in B minor, Op.143 'The Seasons') had not been received by the public and critics alike with the same enthusiasm as had some of his earlier symphonies must have played some part. In published reviews of the two symphonies, the main complaint was that Spohr no longer had anything to say, and was constantly repeating himself; however at the same time the high standard of his compositions was generally recognised. A good example well worth citing here is in a review of a performance of the eighth symphony in 1848 which is typical of the critical response to Spohr's later instrumental works:

"... it is thus our view that it brings together no more and no less than the very qualities which exemplify and characterise all Spohr's earlier compositions; the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and modulatory element, the application and working out of themes and everything which is essential in the construction of an orchestral work, are all to be found here too in their long since familiar way. This is in no way disconcerting since Spohr's range of ideas, which has produced a great deal that is both beautiful and uplifting, is at once clear cut and well defined and he can, as a result, confine himself to reproducing them since his outstanding qualities have already been established in his earlier works."⁶

In the tenth symphony Spohr is clearly reacting to the complaint that all he can do is repeat himself. But what Hans Glenewinkel says about the string quartet WoO 41 which was composed just before the symphony – namely that in it "Spohr intended to launch a radical rethink of his style" – is also true of his last orchestral work. It is the shortest of all Spohr's symphonies and is characterised by a fundamentally classical approach absent in all his earlier ones. In all its four movements the formal functions of each individual section are defined and separated by unusually clear cæsuras; the themes of each movement are either periodic in structure (i.e., the first and last sections correspond) or at least built up by the addition of two and four-bar units. To cite Glenewinkel again and what he has to say about the late quartets, here in his last symphony Spohr returns to the "classical ideals of his youth", but does so without renouncing his own personal style or ignoring the musical possibilities developed in the meantime. For instance, here, for the first time in his symphonic writing, he makes use of the tuba, valve horns and valve trumpets while whole sections of the work are archaic in character, a feature which Spohr had already introduced as a central theme in his 'Historical' Symphony in G major, Op.116.

The thematic material is reduced to a minimum and almost every bar is thematically linked or motivated by its formal function; bridge passages are by and large omitted and the avoidance of musical redundancy is obvious. The first movement develops a formal feature which Spohr had already tried out in 1820 in his second symphony: there is no slow introduction, instead the first subject complex consists of two main thematic elements, both in the main key, the first of which acts as an expansive opening gesture which with its clear-cut dotted rhythm and orchestral harmonisation is reminiscent of a French overture. Unlike the second symphony, the thematic material of the opening and the motif which develops after it are here closely linked; it consists predominantly of a configuration of three notes identified by a double-dotted rhythm and an upwards leap which appears at the start and recurs at various intervals. [...]

The movements which follow are characterised by similarly compressed themes and motifs. In the second movement the core motif of the main theme consists of lively alternating crotchets and quavers which is, in fact, a quotation from the start of the finale of the eighth symphony but which is transposed from G to A flat. The phrasing however makes it clear that despite their visual similarity the two themes are based on entirely different tonal concepts but the different setting lends subtlety to the phrasing in the tenth symphony. It is up to the conductor and his interpretation to make clear the distinction in what superficially appears to be identical by accurate phrasing.

This motif and its variants dominate 70 of the 98 bars of this movement, including the four-bar return to the recapitulation (bars 48-51: this short passage hardly deserves to be called a development). As in the first movement, the secondary theme (bars 34-40) and the final group (bars 41-47) are merely episodic.

The scherzo and finale form one unit in that their themes are based on the same material, though in a wide variety of modifications. The basic idea is simplicity itself: the vertical and horizontal combination of melodic lines rising and falling by degrees and differentiated by alternations of crotchets and quavers, syntactically built up on the delayed elements of a cadence and on syncopation acting as a half-close at the centre of a periodic section and as a conclusion. The start of the scherzo subtly demonstrates the basic principle in disguise though not as yet fully integrated into its structural syntax. As it unfolds, its main theme emerges from the addition of a cadential formula and the inclusion of a 2 x 2 bar section. On the other hand the main theme of the symphony's finale brings together the rising and falling motifs stated simultaneously at the start of the scherzo to form a continuous line.

These brief observations will, we hope, provide some evidence that even in his unpublished late works Spohr had lost nothing of the compositional expertise which, even in the eyes of his critics, characterises his earlier works. Perhaps the reason why the composer rejected these late works may be sought in the fact that in his own opinion he was unable to reconcile his own high musical standards with a language which was appropriate for a new era yet reflected the music of the past.

The sources

The sketches of all four movements, 12 pages of music but no title page. The first page bears the title 'Sinfonie'. To the left, above the first line, the word 'Allegro' and to its right 'Harmony'. On the upper right-hand margin a different and thinner hand (possibly that of Marianne Spohr) has written 'Manuscript of the 10th/unpublished symphony of L. Spohr/composed in April 1857'. Beside the word 'Sinfonie' an asterisk draws attention to a footnote: 'On the express wish of the composer this is not to be published'. The manuscript is a sketch in a three-stave system in which the outer voices and the main harmonic variations are notated in what is already their final rhythmical form, sometimes with indications of the instrumentation.

The passages here are largely in line with the final text of the score in Spohr's hand; however, no movement is noted down in its entirety. The sketches are housed in the Louis Spohr memorial research centre in Kassel⁷.

The autograph score is bound in a strong green marbled cover. On the centre of it there is a label on which is written 'M.1919.257/Louis Spohr/Symphony No.10 E flat/manuscript score'. Written in pencil on the upper left of the cover's otherwise unprinted back is 'Mus.Ms.Spohr 11'. The following page is blank. The bound pages of the score are 76 in number, 72 of which are written on both sides in what is now somewhat faded ink. Each rectangular page has 18 lines; the pages from one to 72 are all numbered on the top outer corner in somewhat faded ink. There is no title page. The word 'Symphonie' is inscribed in German script on the middle of the first page of the score at the top centre by a third hand; another later hand has added the words 'von Louis Spohr', this time in roman script. Above this inscription and to its left the word 'Allegro' has been added, also in roman script. Partly over the tempo marking, a third hand has pencilled in the library's catalogue details, viz 'Mus.ms.autogr.Spohr 11'.

The instrumental parts are in a copyist's hand and black ink on high quality 12-stave paper; the separate parts are all bound in blue cardboard which in each case has an eight-sided sticker on which is written 'Symphony No.X [+ specified instrument]'. Here are no preliminary pages; some of the instrumental parts have title pages, each of which is covered with the words 'Symphonie [or Simphonie] by L.Spohr [+ specified instrument]'. The parts that have no title pages have identical titles at the top of the first page of the score. In all cases roman script is used. All the parts contain varying degrees of amendment in blue, red or lead pencil. The proof-readers must have been at least two in number: none was identical with the main copyist.

The autograph score and instrumental parts are held in the Mendelssohn archives in the music department of the State Library in Berlin where they are among its Berlin-Prussian cultural holdings and classified with the shelf marks Mus.ms.autgr.Spohr 11 (score) and Mus.ms.21014 (parts)⁸.

Notes

1. See *Louis Spohr's Autobiography* (Kassel & Göttingen 1860-61, vol.2, p.379). The new edition of Spohr's memoirs edited by Folker Göthel and published in 1968 does not include the section that is not related by Spohr himself. The two quartets mentioned can only be WoO 41 (first version in G minor, second version in E flat major) of 1856 and WoO 42 (in G minor) completed in August 1857. See Folker Göthel, editor, *Thematisch-bibliographisches Verzeichnis der Werke von Louis Spohr*, Tutzing 1981, pp.300-302.
2. Horst Heussner, *Die Symphonien Ludwig Spohrs*, Marburg 1956, dissertation.
3. Edward Speyer, *Wilhelm Speyer der Liederkomponist*, Munich 1925. In contrast to the symphony, in November 1857 Spohr thus had not disowned the two quartets.
4. Huessner, *op.cit.*
5. Hans Glenewinkel, *Spohrs Kammermusik für Streichinstrumente. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Streichquartetts im XIX. Jahrhundert*, Munich, 1912, dissertation, p.79.
6. These views, which appeared in a review of the 'tenth subscription concert' in *Signale für die musikalische Welt* 6 (1848), refer to a performance of the symphony at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 14 December 1848.
7. Photocopies of the sketches were kindly provided by the late Herfried Homburg of the Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft.
8. I am grateful to this library for making available a microfilm of the autograph score and separate parts and for granting me permission to examine the sources.