

SPOHR'S SYMPHONIES: A PERSONAL VIEW FROM 1975 TO 2011

by Christopher Tutt

The article on 'Spohr's Symphonies' appeared in Spohr Journal Four (1975) when the only such work available in a commercial recording was No.3. In the 36 years since then there have been three cycles on compact disc as well as a number of separate recordings plus more broadcasts along with several live performances. We thought it would be interesting and illuminating to reprint this 1975 essay unchanged, adding the author's 2011 "second thoughts" based on his much greater familiarity with the symphonies.

I HAVE recently had the opportunity to read the only detailed account of Spohr's symphonies; the dissertation completed by Horst Heussner in 1956 at the University of Marburg. I have also heard tape recordings of the third, fourth, fifth and seventh symphonies. I would now like to give some of Heussner's main points and add a few comments of my own. I am not maintaining that Spohr's symphonies are unblemished masterpieces but they do have many fine qualities and are well worth hearing.

Second thoughts 2011: I have now heard all of the symphonies in recordings conducted by Alfred Walter, Howard Griffiths (except the four still to be issued) and Howard Shelley as well as individual discs under Karl-Anton Rickenbacher, Gerd Albrecht, Leopold Hager, Tamás Sulyok and Georg Schlemm plus broadcasts under Raymond Leppard, Vaclav Neumann, Norman del Mar and Manoug Parikian, in addition to private CDs of two concerts conducted by Eugene Minor. I have also looked at scores of all the symphonies in the editions from Garland Publishing and Ries & Erler. In view of all this, the expansion of my knowledge of the works is considerable.

When Spohr wrote his first symphony in 1811 he had already composed a considerable number of chamber works and concertos. He was acquainted with Beethoven's earlier symphonies and was fully conscious of the stature the symphony had reached as an art form. His Symphony No.1 in E flat is in the usual four movements with a slow introduction to the first, and the third being a scherzo. The orchestra requires the use of trombones.

It was an immediate success and received many performances in the first half of the nineteenth century and even later. Spohr himself thought highly of it, although he usually came to dislike his first attempt in any genre. Heussner feels that the slow movement lacks significance and the scherzo spins out its material for too long, but he points to several places where Spohr's individual use of harmony shows up through the classical style of the whole.

Second thoughts 2011: Heussner's critical remarks have some justification but recent recordings, particularly the Hyperion release with Howard Shelley conducting, show how beautiful the slow movement is and how vigorous the scherzo.

Symphony No.2 in D minor, written in 1820 for his first season in London, follows the same classical pattern as the first, but as one would expect from a work of Spohr's best period it shows greater individuality and richness of expression.

The introduction to the first movement has the time signature of the whole and its material reappears several times later in the movement. The second subject is a slow lyrical theme which provides a good contrast to the rhythmic energy of the first subject. The scherzo is marked *Presto*

and is twice repeated as in Beethoven's seventh symphony. The symphony was well received in London and within a year had been performed by most of the major orchestras in Germany. There was some criticism of the soloistic writing for the first violins in some passages, for Spohr had wished to exploit the virtuosity of the London string players. This symphony was the particular favourite of the British composer William Sterndale Bennett.

Second thoughts 2011: Recent recordings and live performances have shown that it does indeed give us all we "would expect from a work of Spohr's best period".

The third symphony, Op. 78, of 1828 shows further movement towards romantic expression in its first two movements but the scherzo and finale still owe much to classical models. The first movement development section as such disappears and is replaced by a repeat of the slow introduction in the *Allegro* tempo. The finale has a fugato section based on the first subject. The symphony has both plenty of vigour and colourful instrumentation. I do not regard it as faded and insignificant and I am sure that music lovers whose tastes are not too austere would find much to enjoy were they given the chance to hear the work.

Second thoughts 2011: This has now been recorded a number of times, most recently by Howard Griffiths on CPO and Howard Shelley on Hyperion, both excellent performances.

It helped that Bärenreiter brought out a new critical edition in the 1950s. Despite the overall quality of the symphony, as yet it has not become a regular piece in British concert halls.

Spohr's next symphony, *The Consecration of Sound*, written four years later, shows a departure from the procedures of the earlier symphonies. The four-movement structure is retained but, owing to the requirements of the programme, a march replaces the scherzo and the finale is a *Larghetto* followed by an *Allegretto*. The result is a longer, more rambling work of variable inspiration. However, its strong contrasts and colourful use of the orchestra made it one of the most frequently performed orchestral works of the nineteenth century, but it fell from favour as its tone painting paled beside the more garish palettes of the later romantics.

It seems a contradiction that the introduction to the first movement is supposed to represent in music the "blank silence of nature before the creation of sound" but, nevertheless, it is an impressive and mysterious opening which owes something to "Chaos" from Haydn's *Creation*. The *Allegro*, in regular sonata form, represents teeming life and the sounds of nature. The first subject is gentle and relaxed without any climax for full orchestra and the second subject begins quietly too but is remarkable for its wonderfully original tone painting which looks forward to Wagner and Mahler. A contrast is provided by the loud stormy music of the development section. In spite of the conventional framework, this movement sounds quite unlike any previous symphonic movement both in its pacing and its rich, romantic colouring.

The second movement has three themes which represent a lullaby, a dance and a serenade. Again the orchestral colouring is richly blended, particularly for the lullaby but I find the actual theme of the serenade played by a solo cello somewhat flavourless. The juxtaposition of these three themes with their different time signatures towards the end of the movement is most ingenious.

If the earlier movements allow some of the individual instruments to shine, the third gives the full orchestra its head. Extra percussion is added for the march section which makes a powerful effect after the quiet ending of the previous movement. In place of a trio is a long, bustling section interspersed with quiet reflective passages. After the return of the march comes a "prayer of thanksgiving" in a contrapuntal style, outwardly impressive but rather stilted.

The finale represents funeral music and "consolation in tears" and, although not deeply felt, is solemn and broadly laid out. Of particular interest is the first theme of the *Allegretto* which is similar to a theme in the finale of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* symphony. Both movements are

concerned with thoughts about death but there is a great gulf between Spohr's calm objectivity and Tchaikovsky's torrent of subjective feeling.

The work as a whole begs several questions: Do the four movements really belong to each other?; should the work be called a symphony?; What is the value of "programme music" and can it be contained within traditional structures? One may concede that the artistic conception was mistaken yet still enjoy the musical delights it undoubtedly contains and which, for me, more than outweigh its dull patches.

Second thoughts 2011: There are still questions about how this symphony hangs together as a whole. I don't think we yet have the definitive recorded version of it. Howard Shelley does well with the slow movement including the serenade, and he makes the "Prayer of Thanksgiving" convincing at the end of the third movement.

Symphony No.5 in C minor is again in four movements but does not follow any expressed programme; yet it shows further development of Spohr's powers as a symphonist. There is more consistency of thought and internal unity than in the earlier works and in style the more obvious traces of the classical models have gone; we may be more aware of premonitions of the future, hints of Brahms or even of Bruckner and Elgar. The use of the orchestra is firm but less colourful than in the fourth symphony.

The concert directors in Vienna who commissioned this symphony in 1837 were delighted with it and wrote to Spohr to say how honoured they felt to have received such a fine work from "Germany's major tone-poet." Why has it fallen into such neglect? In spite of the good design and deep feeling it expresses, Spohr did not have quite the inspiration to give all the themes distinction and to avoid some of the clichés of his harmonic style.

The theme of the slow introduction is the "motto" theme of the work, returning not only in the middle of the first *Allegro* but also as the second subject of the finale. It expresses quiet yearning at first, then it becomes more and more restless until the full orchestra rings out with the powerful first subject. This subsides into a gentle second subject but soon this is interrupted by loud outbursts. The entries of the theme of the introduction, first on oboe and later on the first violins, are of great beauty but are overcome by restless material each time. The movement as a whole shows a mood of conflict not found in the earlier symphonies though the style can be traced back to such overtures as *Macbeth* (1825) and *Der Alchymist* (1830).

The slow movement has an impressive solemnity, heightened by the use of trombones. There is a quicker-moving fugato middle section and a quiet coda of great beauty and depth of feeling. The scherzo brings a lively contrast without any triviality or loss of dignity. The sense of conflict returns with the finale, a *Presto* in C minor, in which the restless first subject engulfs the gentle theme from the introduction to the first movement, reappearing as the second subject here. There is a great deal of contrapuntal working out of themes and the movement is a fitting conclusion to the symphony.

Second thoughts 2011: Recent recordings have confirmed the overall quality of the music and shown the musical logic of what might appear weaker passages on first hearing. More live performances are needed to get this symphony as well known as it deserves.

The same cannot be said for the finale of his next symphony, *The Historical Symphony*, the weakest part of a work held together only by its programme. As some critics pointed out at the time, the idea of imitating the styles of well-known composers of the past could hardly suit a serious work of art.

The finale, representing its own time (1840), uses a big orchestra in a noisy, bustling fashion, presumably to imitate contemporary French composers, but it contains little of the gusto and abundance of melody found in the works of Auber, Berlioz or Hérold. Heussner points out that

here Spohr uses chromatic harmony to a greater extent than ever and leaves the tonality obscure for long stretches.

Second thoughts 2011: In spite of the critical comments of Heussner and a number of other writers, this symphony does get quite a few live performances and has had several recordings.

The programme arouses curiosity and the slow movement and middle section of the first movement are examples of Spohr at his most beautiful. In recent recordings the finale, in spite of its crudities, has considerable vigour.

The idea for Spohr's seventh symphony, *Irdisches und Göttliches im Menschenleben*, written two years later, may seem equally pretentious with its two orchestras representing good and evil, but it inspired Spohr to write some of his best music. The juxtaposition of a small chamber group of eleven instruments and a large orchestra is an obvious extension of the double quartet idea, and the result is that Spohr was able to use to the full his skill in handling various combinations of solo instruments.

The first movement, with the subtitle "World of Childhood", features mainly the small orchestra and is typical of Spohr's chamber music style at its best. We hear more of the large orchestra in the second movement, "Time of the Passions", another sonata movement preceded by a slow introduction. Spohr's feelings are fully engaged in this music and the conflict expressed was obviously very real to him, though the means employed seem very restrained when compared to the way Liszt and Berlioz expressed similar ideas.

The finale, "The Final Victory of the Divine", is in two parts, a quick section in which bustling passages for the large orchestra are answered by calm phrases from the smaller orchestra, and an *Adagio* for the two orchestras blending together. Like the ending of the fourth symphony, this slow movement makes a fitting close to the work. Its style and sentiment are similar to some sections of Spohr's religious choral works so it would not appeal to those with a prejudice against Victorian church music but many people could still find it inspiring.

Second thoughts 2011: It is not surprising that Schumann wrote such a positive review of this symphony. Further performances and recordings bring out the vigour of the musical invention and the beauty of the orchestration.

Symphony No.8 in G, written in 1847, did not have much success, yet it has several interesting features. It has the normal order of movements but the scherzo is marked *Allegretto* with a 2/4 time signature and has the character of an intermezzo. In it there are prominent parts for the solo violin, clarinet and horn. The horn also has an important solo part in the finale which follows the third symphony in using a fugato in place of the development. Heussner does not discuss the stature of this symphony but it is evidently rather lightweight compared to the previous conventional symphony, the fifth.

Second thoughts 2011: A broadcast performance in the bicentenary year 1984 helped to bring out the real stature of this symphony. Even in its own day it was thought to be inferior by some of the less sympathetic critics of the time and, unlike many of the earlier symphonies, it did not become part of the repertory. The reproach that Spohr was just repeating himself does not stand up when good recordings show the distinction of the music. The introduction to the first movement, though similar to a number of such passages in earlier works, has through its masterly use of harmony and orchestration conjured up a mood of anxious expectation which is dispelled by the lyrical first subject. The slow movement with its suggestion of a funeral march is one of Spohr's finest and the third movement is original in style and a musical delight. The finale is rather lightweight in character but again has a distinct identity.

Spohr's last published symphony was another piece of programme music, *The Seasons*,

composed at the beginning of 1850. The first movement, "Winter", is in regular sonata form without a slow introduction and does not have an obvious connection with its programme. A link passage including bird song effects represents the "Coming of Spring" and leads to a cheerful minuet-type movement portraying spring.

"Summer" is a gloomy slow movement with divided strings representing the oppressive humidity of a summer's day and in the middle of the movement we hear rumbles of distant thunder on the lower strings. There is another link passage to the cheerful finale depicting "Autumn" in which the horns have prominent parts and which contains the melody of a wine-drinking song "Bekränzt mit Laub". The general effect is somewhat marred by academic working out of the themes and by over-rich harmonisation in places. The programme is simple and easily understood, so this symphony may well have as strong and immediate an impact on audiences as any of the earlier ones. But when it is compared to the others it becomes clear how little of Spohr's style had changed since 1830 or earlier at a time of rapid development of new techniques in music.

Second thoughts 2011: Heussner does not recognise how much Spohr, with fairly conventional material, conjures up a convincing idea of winter in the first movement. The harmony and orchestration with its greater deployment of heavy brass and the effective lower parts really do make one feel the gloom of winter. The second subject, which at first hearing might seem just a typically less distinguished example of such a theme, actually can give one the feeling of trudging with difficulty through the snow. A lively performance of the finale sweeps away doubts about any formalism such as academic working-out.

Early in 1857 Spohr composed another symphony but after one rehearsal he decided that it was not good enough to be published. It is in the usual four movements but without a slow introduction and is shorter than the other symphonies. It has the same key, E flat, as the first symphony and shows some reversion to a more classical style.

Second thoughts 2011: There has been a real change in the fortunes of this symphony. In recent years it has been published, given live performances and now has been included in the two current complete recordings of the symphonies. The performances have shown that it has plenty of vigour and freshness of orchestral sound. The slow movement ranks with the best in the other symphonies and any weakness of construction in the sonata movements can be overlooked in the two lively recorded versions.

Spohr's symphonies do not have as important a place in his output as his concertos and chamber music but I do not think that this justifies the complete neglect into which they have fallen. His fourth and fifth symphonies in particular are well worth listening to in their own right and also because of their historical interest in the story of the symphony form after Beethoven. In fact it could be argued that they have as much right to be included in a series called "The History of the Symphony" as the works of Mendelssohn and Schumann.

It is true that most of Spohr's symphonies came from the later part of his career when he was finding it harder to find fresh inspiration and so tended more and more to repeat himself. What is so remarkable is not that he failed to write another set of nine great symphonies but that with the wide range of his musical activities and interests he achieved as much as he did as a symphonist.

Second thoughts 2011: Looking at my original summing up, I was perhaps too harsh in suggesting that Spohr tended more and more to repeat himself in his later symphonies. Mixed in with the familiar fingerprints are a number of original ideas which become more striking with familiarity.