

SPOHR ON THE ART OF QUARTET AND ORCHESTRAL PLAYING

by Vaughan Jones

The author is a violinist and also founder and leader of the Manor House String Quartet which has performed string quartets by Spohr in concerts. He has also edited Spohr's G major quartet, Op.82, No.2 for Merton Music. Vaughan Jones, who was educated at Charterhouse, studied at the Birmingham Conservatoire and the Royal College of Music while his violin teachers included Kato Havas. He can be heard playing duos for violin and viola by Spohr, Rolla and Kalliwoda on a CD he has produced (Manor House Music 001) which can be ordered online from www.manorhousemusic.co.uk/shop.php, price £12 including postage and packing.

IN HIS *Violin-Schule* of 1832 Louis Spohr offers the modern string player much invaluable advice on playing in smaller as well as larger ensembles. This not only gives us a rare insight into the practices of the early nineteenth century but is of interest in its own right, emanating as it does from one of the most influential violinists and pedagogues of his time. Spohr was a tremendous early advocate of Beethoven's string quartets (even in the face of much more conservative attitudes) so the modern interpreter of these great works has much to learn from his approach.

Also, the instruction offered by the *Violin-Schule* casts light on Spohr's own achievements in this realm: namely his 36 string quartets, including the six *quatuors brillants*.

Spohr is very much of the view that the first violinist of a string quartet predominates "...and with him rests the inspiration of the whole performance" although "his ascendancy must not be too evident". This is a natural viewpoint from a composer who grew up with the great quartets of Mozart and Haydn, where the melodic interest more often than not rested with the first violin, although the remarkable journey both of these composers took resulted in a greater integration of instrumentation than had hitherto been heard. He was also a much admired solo player of virtuoso works and therefore many of Spohr's own quartets bear testament to his own talents as a violinist much in the tradition of Rode.

Martin Lovett of the Amadeus Quartet was once asked what the secret of that great ensemble's sound was. He replied that in his opinion each member consistently listened to the other three musicians' playing more than his own. In that way, they not only developed really wonderful tuning but a glowing resonance which was achieved by a perfect blending with one another's sounds.

Interestingly, Spohr writes as a footnote that "...the qualities of musicianship which are absolutely indispensable to the leader of quartets" are "...the power of interpretation, and transmitting in actual performance his conceptions to his coadjutors; the blending of his own individuality with traits peculiar to their playing; great sensibility; directness of attention; unerring control; watchfulness to a perfect ensemble; and, with all, an unconstrained, soulful delivery"

It has to be said that most of that list would apply to playing in any circumstances (and not just to the leader of the group!), but also that a knowledge of the other players' music as well as a constant blending of sounds is the key to cohesive chamber music playing. And this intense

listening would naturally result in "...subordinating his own part where at times the chief interest of a passage passes to another instrument".

Spohr was a highly versatile musician (rather like the Hungarian Joseph Joachim) and as such knew that to play string quartets required a stylistic approach very different from playing bravura solos, or even *quatuors brillants*. He states that the "...virtuoso must, in quartet playing, lay aside any idiosyncracies which may distinguish his performance of the brilliant solo, and surrender himself wholly to his author, in the delivery of whose production he is but sustaining a part".

And in a demonstration of his systematic discipline he advises the student quartet player to study composition "...including as it does harmony and form" which will "...reveal to him that which not even the intuition of genius can afford to set aside". In other words, the more insight the performer has into the processes of creation, the more understanding he will have in realising the composer's intentions.

With regard to the orchestral violinist, Spohr offers us the benefits of his experiences both as conductor and symphonist. In this context, it is the role of the conductor, with help from the leader of the violins, to divine and elucidate the intentions of the composer. In this duty "...his is absolute authority, to sustain which every player in the orchestra, aided very materially by the leader at the first desk, must make it his earnest and willing purpose"

The orchestral violinist must eschew his soloistic tendencies and put his heart and mind to playing in such a manner that it will blend perfectly with the rest of his section. Indeed, even performing passages of music in higher positions than one's colleagues, in order to achieve a richer tone "...are here inadmissible as tending to destroy the unity of performance".

This is as much a reflection of the repertoire of the day (with the likes of Herold, Cherubini, Rossini, Mendelssohn, Auber *et al*) which would have necessitated a greater purity in the sound of the string sections as of rigidity of approach. Nowadays, the bigger string sections of the major symphony orchestras would often encourage a wider diversity of playing styles to create a richer sound, particularly when performing the later romantic and twentieth century repertoires.

The scourge of many an orchestral string player's life is the constant changing of bowings during rehearsals in order to bring a uniformity to the visual appearance of the performance as well as to the sound.

This function is often established by the conductor and then refined by the leaders of the sections under the guidance of the principal first violin (or concertmaster) during rehearsals. Good bowings that have the desired musical effect usually result from the experience and wisdom of the leader as, with the exception of increasingly fastidious twentieth century composers, most orchestral scores are not marked with bowings.

Spohr notes that "...the players in an orchestra come frequently from many different schools, so that each has a different manner of bowing and, consequently, a different use of the divisions of the bow". Nowadays, with a standardisation of technique and a more international approach, players in an orchestra, while differing in style, do not generally come from a discernible school of violin playing.

Surprisingly, Spohr advocates allocating the down beats to the down-bows of the string players "...the unaccented beat with the up-bow and that, therefore, each bar should begin with the down-stroke". This would be an outlandish concept to the modern day orchestral player who would be equally proficient at playing most passages on an up or a down-bow!

Much of the advice is of a rather obvious nature, in all probability to enhance the sense of completeness in the text. For example, players are instructed to occasionally glance at the conductor as well as display sensitivity when accompanying a soloist "...suited the strength of his tone to that of the solo which must never be overpowered". Similarly, the orchestral players

“...will guard against either hurrying or retarding the time of the soloist, but will follow him implicitly should he allow himself occasionally to deviate from a strict measure”.

Vocal recitatives are given a special mention, as these are particularly prone to the *tempo rubato*, as well as to the temperamental whims of the individual singers. The suggestion here is to “...insert the vocal part on a separate stave above the accompaniment” in order to facilitate a rhythmical cohesion between orchestra and singer.

Often, in orchestral and operatic music the tremolo is used in order to create dramatic tension. Spohr recommends it to be played “...somewhat above the middle of the bow” with a supple and free movement of the wrist, although he warns against its prolonged use as it “...would be injurious to the strength of any player to maintain the proper velocity”. Today the tremolo is often executed in the upper half of the bow and emanates from the elbow.

Finally, Spohr proffers some advice on the tuning up of the orchestra. This should be “...accomplished with the least possible noise”, the leader taking it from the oboe or all the wind instruments combined. In typically methodical fashion, he explains the correct mode of behaviour as if it were the rules of a game of cards — and woe betide the hapless violinist who takes the opportunity to play some scraps from the concerto he is currently attempting: “Those who have completed their tuning should not, by unnecessary preluding, hinder the tuning of the other members of the orchestra”.

The performance is now about to commence but even here Spohr has something to add — once tuning has died down — for “...the performance should be preceded by a few moments’ silence as this greatly enhances the opening effect of the music”.

Note

The translations used here from Spohr’s *Violin-Schule* are taken from the 1878 English edition published by Boosey & Co. The title page reads: ‘Spohr’s Violin School, revised and edited, with additional text, by Henry Holmes. The translation from the German by Florence A. Marshall.’

Holmes (1839-1905) and his brother Alfred (1836-1876) inspired the composer to write his last three great violin duos (F major, Op.148, D major, Op.150 and C major, Op.153, of 1854-55) which he dedicated to them after previously hearing the pair play some of his earlier duos during his visit to England in 1853.

Among the additional text provided by Holmes is the suggestion that “For his first experience in quartet-playing the student should select from the grander Quartets of Haydn, the Quartets of Mozart, and those of Beethoven’s early period; of the same class of work two others of precious worth should be included, viz., Mendelssohn’s Quartet in E flat, and Schumann’s in A minor, No.1”. Spohr, of course, did not have the quartets of the two last named composers before him when he wrote his *Violin-Schule*.