

SPOHR AND VIVALDI: A STUDY IN MUSICAL REPUTATIONS

by Keith Warsop

PAIRING Louis Spohr with Antonio Vivaldi may initially seem strange but their careers had a lot in common, even extending to their posthumous reputations. Both started out as violin virtuosi who first achieved fame with works for their own instrument, in particular their concertos, but both then went on to extend their range successfully into opera and choral music. After their deaths both slipped from their original high status and Vivaldi was as conspicuous by his absence from nineteenth century histories of music as Spohr was from those of the twentieth century.

According to Walter Kolneder in his *Antonio Vivaldi: His Life and Work*: “Vivaldi’s music remained dead for some hundred years, shrouded in the dust of archives and libraries.” In fact, Kolneder is slightly over-dramatising the situation as it took a few decades following Vivaldi’s death in 1741 for his music to disappear completely. The ‘Spring’ Concerto from *The Four Seasons* remained popular in Paris until the 1770s and he still rates a brief mention in Sir John Hawkins’s *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, published in London in 1776.

When work began on a collected edition of Johann Sebastian Bach in the middle of the nineteenth century, his reworkings of Vivaldi were discovered and interest in the latter got under way, though only for his historical position as an influence on Bach. For instance, in 1867 an essay by Julius Rühlmann on the links between the two composers stated that Vivaldi’s music was still “almost entirely dead”. It was not until Arnold Schering’s pioneering study *Geschichte des Instrumentalkonzerts* of 1905 that Vivaldi’s significance on his own account gained recognition. However, he was still a minor figure on the fringe of the musical world in general until the discovery in the late 1920s of a large proportion of his personal archive led to increased interest in his works. Because the study, editing, publication and performance of this material took many years, along with the interruptions of the Second World War, it was not until the 1950s that Vivaldi began his surge towards popularity, spearheaded by *The Four Seasons* which appeared on influential LP recordings from Decca (Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra) in 1950, HMV (Virtuosi di Roma) in 1954 and Philips (I Musici) in 1956. This process today shows no signs of abating as in more recent years his many operas have been revived and recorded, backed up by a number of new discoveries found in archives around the world.

In his 1979 BBC Music Guide *Vivaldi*, Michael Talbot discusses the composer’s musical strong and weak points and puts forward a view which could easily be applied to Spohr: “Vivaldi’s strength lies far more in the unmistakable personality which he stamps on all his compositions in every genre — a factor which redeems many an otherwise undistinguished work.” He goes on to suggest that without these ‘Vivaldisms’ his music would lack many of the qualities which makes it so attractive to us. A similar point is made by violinist Duilio M. Galfetti in the booklet accompanying his recording of seven Vivaldi concertos on a Naïve CD of 2008: “Vivaldi’s highly personal language might in the long run appear repetitive in its formal designs and its melodic ideas, but more careful listening reveals that this is not the case with the immense majority of his concertos since the differences always depend on small details which our modern sensibility perhaps tends not to pick up.” Turning to Spohr, we find the same

viewpoint put forward by Olav Anton Thommessen in his booklet note for a 2010 Naxos CD of the composer's concertantes for two violins, opp.48 and 88: "The subtleties inherent in Spohr's style have often been regarded as his weakness. This is certainly not the case, but the listener must attune himself to a sonic world inhabited by a delicate sensibility, to small shifts in thematic emphasis."

On Spohr's reputation, Clive Brown's critical biography (1984) says: "For a period of more than thirty years — from the death of Beethoven in 1827 to his own death in 1859 — he would have been regarded by many musicians and music-lovers as the greatest living composer; while very few would have denied him a prominent place in the first rank of great composers. Yet within little more than a quarter of a century after his death the bulk of his music had disappeared from the repertoire, and not only were his achievements disparaged, but also the magnitude of his reputation and the extent of his influence on musical developments during his lifetime were largely forgotten." Professor Brown continues: "By the 1890s the convention of including Spohr in a list of the great composers had been almost entirely discontinued" and then notes: "By the beginning of the twentieth century, even the extent of Spohr's impact on his own epoch was being forgotten or misunderstood. In many of the histories of music written since the Great War he has scarcely been mentioned." Finally, he says: "It was even possible for Eric Werner in *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and his Age* (1963) to write a chapter entitled 'The musical axes of Europe' without once mentioning Spohr, and he is not by any means alone in his myopia."

It is true that, unlike Vivaldi, a couple of Spohr's works continued to be performed fairly regularly; the Nonet perhaps because it fitted into concerts given by large chamber groups who otherwise would have been restricted to Beethoven's Septet and Schubert's Octet plus any more modern compositions they were brave enough to play; and the Eighth Violin Concerto which still held attractions for virtuosos like Jascha Heifetz though he did not hesitate to cut out some of the sections where the soloist is silent.

Otherwise, a few works which received occasional performances early in the twentieth century (the opera *Jessonda*, the Seventh and Ninth Violin Concertos and a couple of the double quartets) had disappeared by the 1930s, no doubt shunned especially in Germany following the clampdown on Spohr's music by the Nazis. Indeed, Spohr's stock was so low about this time that Gerald Abraham in his *A Hundred Years of Music* (1938) could declare quite categorically: "Spohr's music is dead", a judgment which closely echoes Rühlmann's 1867 verdict on Vivaldi.

The standard view of Spohr by 1950 is summed up by Leslie Orrey in his chapter on the composer in *The Music Masters 2: After Beethoven to Wagner*: "It is a sad reflection on the error of contemporary judgments that Spohr, in his lifetime regarded as at least the peer of Beethoven, should now be remembered only by a line in a comic opera. Yet the last generation has seen the total eclipse of the whole of his vast output." The comic opera referred to is, of course, *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan.

Moves towards a revival began in the 1950s with the formation of the Louis Spohr Gesellschaft in Kassel in 1954 (to replace the original Spohr Gesellschaft closed down by the Nazis in 1934) and the publication of a small selection of works by Bärenreiter in time for the centenary of his death in 1959. But even in this anniversary year, Denis Stevens, reviewing these new editions in *The Musical Times* of October 1959, agreed with the Gerald Abraham summing up 21 years earlier: "The knell has tolled for passing Spohr."

At this very time, however, there is strong evidence that Abraham himself had recanted his views. Writing in the booklet he edited in 1958 to accompany recordings issued by HMV as *The History of Music in Sound* to partner *The Age of Beethoven* volume in *The New Oxford History*

of *Music*, he commented on recordings of an extract from *Jessonda* and the first movement of the Octet in E major, Op.32. On *Jessonda* he writes: “The musical idiom — the chromatic harmony, the rising chromatic appoggiaturas of the melody, the plastic shapes of figurations — is that of the Romantic Age. When Nadori comes forward at the beginning of the recorded excerpt to announce imminent death to Jessonda, Spohr uses precisely the same means of creating tension (notably the drum rhythm) as the mature Wagner was to use thirty years later when Brünnhilde announces imminent death to Siegmund in the Second Act of *Die Walküre*. When Amazili wonders ‘ob Mitleid ihn erweicht?’ [perhaps pity is weakening him?] Spohr sets ‘ihn erweicht?’ to the universal ‘questioning motive’ of romantic music, and the quasi-polyphony at ‘Heil mir!’ [what fortune!] foreshadows that of *Die Meistersinger*.”

With regard to the Octet, Abraham says: “The interest of the work lies not only in the wonderfully deft scoring but in the thematic work. The first-subject material of the first movement consists of a complex of three themes (*a*, *b*, and *c*) which have already been heard in the *adagio* introduction ... and one of which (*c*) recurs as the second subject ..., thus acting as a binding agent throughout the piece. The themes themselves are marked by typically romantic features (e.g. the violin’s rising chromatic appoggiaturas ... and its tenderly falling sevenths in the bars following ...) And the nature of the themes is accentuated both by their plastic treatment and by the unconventional structure: the second subject is recapitulated before the first.” [Omissions signified by ... were cross-references to more than two pages of musical examples.]

Despite the tepid review by Denis Stevens, the handful of anniversary concerts and publications did generate a modest interest in Spohr and we can consider that he was now in a similar position reached by Vivaldi following Schering’s 1905 study on the history of the concerto. The bicentenary of Spohr’s birth in 1984 encouraged further interest and now two important factors took over. In the foreword to Wolfram Boder’s 2009 translation of his book on the composer, Clive Brown sums up the causes behind the first factor, the dramatic surge in recordings of Spohr’s works: “The fact that, apart from a few of his operas, they are now available in commercial recordings, several of them in multiple versions, reflects to a large extent the exigencies of the recording industry, especially in the last twenty years, when technological changes made it commercially advantageous to respond to niche markets.”

The second factor concerns the arrival of the digital age into the world of music publishing which has been equally beneficial to Spohr. The majority of his compositions were published during his lifetime but as these editions went out of print, they became increasingly difficult to find and expensive to acquire. Digital publishing, however, has made much of Spohr’s output available again so that, as with the Vivaldi discoveries of the 1920s, a greater interest in the music has developed. This technology not only enabled inexpensive facsimiles of the nineteenth century editions to be marketed but also computer music typesetting, most notably with the Sibelius software, has led to new scholarly publications such as the ones edited by Bert Hagels dedicated to the symphonies and concert overtures which include the first appearance of the Tenth Symphony.

The old attitude to Spohr has not completely disappeared, however. In a recent booklet note for a Hyperion recording of Spohr’s Piano Sonata played by Howard Shelley, the critic Richard Wigmore noted the composer’s reputation in his own time but then suggested that only fanatical Spohr partisans would now mention him in the same breath as Mozart and Beethoven. But, after detailing the growth of Spohr recordings noted above, Clive Brown adds that this willingness to record Spohr “is also an indication of our changing attitudes to the musical canon. The idea that only works by the canonical figures of musical history, sanctified by generations of performers and musicologists as ‘great music’, deserve to be heard and studied has been increasingly

questioned, and it is no longer unthinkable to make comparison between Spohr's music and that of Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Schumann." Perhaps if Mr Wigmore had been writing about Vivaldi at the time of Julius Rühlmann in 1867, he might also have suggested that the reputation of the Red Priest in his own time was greatly overrated. Certainly, Clive Brown's acceptance of the possibility of comparing Spohr's music with that of his great contemporaries makes Mr Wigmore's view look as outdated as the nineteenth century comments on Vivaldi.

One critic who was in advance of the standard twentieth century view of Spohr and, indeed, pointed to the parallel with Vivaldi, was Edward Pearce writing in the July 1991 issue of the record review magazine *Classic CD* where he said: "We are surely at the beginning of a major revision of the place in music of Louis Spohr ... ten or 15 years ago he was as obscure as any Minnesinger", and he continued "But all the indications point upwards for Spohr. The low commercial fact that his music is intensely melodic means that a public taste once established can only grow. If there were shares available I would be a heavy buyer. It would be premature to see him as the nineteenth century's answer to the great Vivaldi market, but there is a great volume of work and his clarinet concertos alone, handsomely recorded by Karl Leister, have *Four Seasons* potential." His summing up agrees with Clive Brown rather than Richard Wigmore: "My own guess is that a further decade's exposure of the opus-mountain of the Kassel Konzertmeister will establish a ranking a little below Haydn and Mendelssohn, but in their company and of it."

Using the story of Vivaldi's reputation as our yardstick, it could well appear in the long run that it was the twentieth century which got it wrong about Spohr and that the evaluation of his contemporaries might prove to be correct. But we can only begin to understand Spohr's impact during his lifetime if the works which earned him his Olympian crown are performed by the greatest artists of the day: the operas *Faust*, *Zemire und Azor* and especially *Jessonda*, along with the oratorios *Die letzten Dinge* ('The Last Judgment'), *Des Heilands letzte Stunden* ('Calvary') and *The Fall of Babylon*, plus the finest symphonies (Nos. 2-5 and 7), concertos and chamber music. Such serious string quartets as the D minor Op.74, No.3, or the B minor String Quintet, Op.69, have to be taken up by our star chamber groups.

Only then will it be possible to see if what made Spohr great for his own time can re-establish his status at that level now. We must remember, though, that it took Vivaldi some two hundred years to become a household name again — by that measure it will take at least until 2050 before such a breakthrough could possibly occur for Spohr and therefore allow him to stand alongside Vivaldi as once-forgotten masters whose music has returned from the dead.

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