

SPOHR'S MUSIC FOR THE CLARINET

by Maurice F. Powell

The history of the clarinet and its music is marked by significant collaborations between great composers and eminent executants: Mozart and Stadler, Weber and Baermann, Brahms and Muhlfield; and so it is with Spohr whose special affection for the instrument and immediate grasp of its potentialities was largely due to his meeting the virtuoso Hermstedt.

Johann Simon Hermstedt's career was nothing short of a brilliant success. He was born in 1778, the son of an army musician, and received his education in a school for the sons of soldiers. From 1794 until 1799 he played the clarinet (and probably the violin as well, for he was also an accomplished violinist) in municipal bands, finally enlisting as a "regimentsmusiker", becoming principal clarinetist in his father's regiment. It was during this period that he acquired the basis of his phenomenal technique.

In 1802 he was engaged by the Prinz Gunther Friedrich Karl von Schwarzburg-Sondershausen to form a "Harmoniekorps" - a wind band which quickly achieved a high standard of virtuosity through Hermstedt's skilful and superior arrangements for it. Part of the band's duties consisted of providing musical entertainment at the court's summer Sunday concerts in the wooded Schlosspark. In 1815 Spohr wrote an original composition for the band, the Notturmo, Op. 34, with "Janitscharenmusik", or Turkish instruments..

Hermstedt was promoted to the post of chamber musician to the Prince in 1809, and in 1810 to the position of musical director. He was further promoted in 1824 to Kapellmeister, and in 1835, when the band was disbanded and the court orchestra founded, Hermstedt was made its musical director. He retired from his duties in 1839, and died in 1846.

Fruitful and industrious though his career as a musical director was, it was nevertheless overshadowed by his reputation and prowess as a virtuoso. His playing was dominated by technical skill acquired by pushing himself and his instrument to the extremes. In this respect he was distinguished from his contemporaries in the new era of clarinet virtuosity, foremost among who were Franz Tausch and his pupil Heinrich Baermann.

Tausch (1762-1817), brilliant technician, theorist and teacher, and founder of the Berlin Academy of Wind Instruments in 1805, made far greater demands than did Stamitz or Mozart in their concertos. In some bravura passages he even exceeded the difficulties to be found in the clarinet works of either Weber or Spohr. Baermann, Weber's clarinettist, was a much respected musician, more refined in his execution than Hermstedt, but more conservative. But Hermstedt of Sondershausen, the technical wizard, perhaps even a compulsive player (it is said that the throat disease from which he died may have been caused by excessive playing), was the most remarkable of the early virtuosos.

It must not be thought that Hermstedt was a mere showman. He was an intelligent man (as his letters show), possessed of musicianship and artistic integrity. Clearly, he was destined to enjoy a distinguished career as a performer. It is perhaps fortunate, however, that he was unable to compose music for himself to play, and that the Prince of Sondershausen, himself a keen clarinettist, suggested approaching Spohr who was able to write works tailor-made for his individual technique, yet of lasting intrinsic musical value. Only towards the end of his career when he almost surpassed his own technical capabilities did his playing become occasionally mannered and lacking in taste.

It was during the winter of 1808 that Hermstedt travelled to Gotha with the prince's commission. Up to that time Spohr had not particularly favoured the clarinet, in fact it was only since his appointment as musical director at Gotha in 1805 that he finally resolved to compose seriously in addition to furthering his career as Germany's leading violin virtuoso.

The Konzertstück (Recitative and Adagio) once thought to have been written in 1804 or 5 by Spohr for the Brunswick clarinettist Tretbach, is now known to be an arrangement by Tretbach of the slow movement of Spohr's 6th Violin Concerto. Thus, the first concerto, Op. 26, is Spohr's first solo composition for clarinet. Tretbach later claimed that Spohr had written a concerto for him but this work is also spurious. Tretbach merely transcribed the first movement of Spohr's 6th violin concerto in G minor, Op. 28, a slow movement from a work by Lindpaintner, and the finale from a concerto by Krommer.

* Peter von Lindpaintner (1791-1856) German Composer and Conductor;

* ~~Franz Krommer (Kramer) (1759-1834) Bohemian Composer of Clarinet~~
clarinet music.

Hermstedt arrived in Gotha and played at one of the court subscription concerts. Spohr heard him and was much impressed with his "immense virtuosity, brilliance of tone, and purity of intonation". He gladly assented to the terms of the commission under which he was to receive a handsome gratuity whilst for the time being Hermstedt was to retain possession of the manuscript. Greatly encouraged and stimulated, Spohr immediately began work on the concerto in C minor, and completed it in a few weeks. "I gave free rein to my fancy", he later wrote. Spohr personally delivered the work into Hermstedt's hands during January 1809. The dedication was to the Prince of Sondershausen.

Spohr had sought Hermstedt's advice in general matters concerning the capabilities of the clarinet but even so he had paid too little attention to its limitations and had written passages that for an instrument still in the early stages of development, were impractical. "Far from asking me to alter these passages", he wrote in the first edition of the work "Herr Hermstedt sought to perfect his instrument". In all, Hermstedt made eight modifications to his clarinet in the form of extra keys and holes, improving the quality of some notes, enabling a greater variety of cross and false fingerings, giving more security in the top register, and improving certain awkward trills. Other clarinetists, Baermann for example, also experimented with their instruments in similar ways, an important factor in the new era of virtuosity and as Spohr pointed out further on the preface, "many more followed suit".

Hermstedt was well rewarded for his labours. At the first performance on June 16th 1809 the concerto was an instant and unqualified success, establishing him there and then as one of the foremost living virtuosos. The success of his future concert tours was assured. Spohr too was well satisfied for the critics were united in their praise of the work; precisely the encouragement to compose further that he needed. Hermstedt played the concerto twice more that year (November 23 and 28) in Leipzig where it was subsequently published by Kuhnelt as Op. 26. A long and rewarding partnership was born.

It is not surprising that the first concerto was so successful. It is a masterpiece and for its time replete with strikingly original devices. The first movement opens with a slow introduction; a quiet drumroll introduces a yearning theme in the wind, rising to an orchestral climax with a flourish of trumpets. This leads to the Allegro and one of the most beautiful solo entries in all Spohr's concertos. Throughout his career Spohr strove towards a symphonic conception of the concerto. One of the devices he utilised was the slow introduction. This features first in his music in the A major violin concerto of 1804, of symphonic proportions, clearly derived from the practice of Haydn and Mozart in some of their symphonies. However in this later concerto the introduction is not merely an effective curtain-raiser; it replaces the more customary double exposition and in a few bars sets the tone of the whole work.

The yearning theme becomes the movement's main idea and is subtly transformed to provide the second subject also. Spohr introduces a new idea, "con espressivo" in the development as an alternative to the empty passage work common at this point in the concertos of his contemporaries. Generally bravura passages in

Spohr's concertos are derived from the thematic material thereby increasing the unity of individual movements. The crowning glory of the work is the all too brief Adagio, in A flat major. Delicately scored for clarinet, first and second violins, and cellos only, it provides an interlude of calm between the drama of the first movement and the brilliant exuberance of the finale. Some of Spohr's most endearing qualities are to be found in the Adagio; serene and lovely melody with a hint of chromaticism imparting a wistful flavour. The finale, is a spirited rondo with the wind in the orchestra often taking over the solo role whilst the clarinet indulges in a wealth of accompanying figures. There are some hair-raising triplet passages and a characteristic bitter-sweet twist to the second theme. Spohr shows his romantic leanings in the hushed ending of the work.

Hermstedt proved to have a voracious appetite for new works, for towards the end of 1809 Spohr supplied him with a set of variations, with orchestra, on themes from his opera "Alruna die Tulenkönigin". Hermstedt first played the work on January 15 the following year in Weimar. However, the variations only whetted his appetite for a larger work and within months he was beseeching Spohr to write another concerto.

Spohr had little enough time to spare during the year 1810, for in addition to working on his third opera "Der Zweikaupf mit der Geliebten", he was asked to conduct at Germany's first music festival in Frankenhausen. Somehow Spohr managed to complete the second concerto in time for Hermstedt to play it during the festival (July 20-21).

In spite of the speed of its composition Spohr lavished great care on the E flat major concerto, Op. 57 which is even more brilliant than the earlier one - a tour de force for the soloist. It proved to be another great triumph for both Spohr and Hermstedt. The mood of the concerto is festive as befitted the occasion for which it was written, with greater importance attached to the orchestra *tuttis*. The first movement opens with the more traditional double exposition but the clarinet makes a brief appearance with the main theme before the opening *tutti*. The movement bristles with energy and is punctuated with short fanfare-like *tuttis*. The thematic material is rich and varied: the opening theme is of the classical arpeggio type; the second theme is march-like, and a third theme, which opens the development section is lyrical. Spohr was later to use this melody in his opera 'Jessonda' (1823) in the aria (No. 7 in the score) 'Die ihr Fühlende betrübet'. The slow movement, an Adagio in A flat major, is cast in the German "bogen" (bow) form and is one of the finest that Spohr ever wrote. The opening section is written mainly in the "chalumeau" register of the clarinet, at one stage the soloist being in canon with the bassoon. The horns herald the dramatic central section where above throbbing triplets in the orchestra a wide-ranging theme, derived from Spohr's violin style, is introduced. Towards the end of the movement, it is the turn of the flute to engage in gentle musical conversation with the soloist. The finale is instantly appealing in Spohr's favourite rondo-polonaise style which bubbles over with *joie de vivre*. Spohr pulls out all the stops as it were and displays his complete mastery of the orchestra and new-found confidence in his technique. One contemporary critic wrote: "One does not know whether to listen to the soloist or to the wonderful wind parts in the orchestra; even the timpani are solo".

The second concerto lays great claim to being the finest of the four and is certainly one of Spohr's outstanding concertos. It is also a landmark in his career as a composer. What concerto by any contemporary could equal his achievement in this work? - only the concertos of Beethoven surpass it.

In 1811 Spohr was again invited to conduct at the Frankenhausen music festival (July-10-11), to write a symphony for the grand opening and to play a violin concerto. He also wrote "at Hermstedt's earnest solicitations" a pot-pourri for clarinet and orchestra in F major, Op. 80 on themes from *Winter's "Opferfest" The work is not so much a mere medley of the most popular themes of the opera but rather a miniature concerto with the slow movement first (Larghetto, 6/8) followed by an Allegro (Allegro, 2/2) and finishing with an Allegretto (3/8). Hermstedt played the work again in Leipzig on August 15 1812 and it proved to be popular with "virtuosos and connoisseurs".

Spohr wrote no more solo compositions for the clarinet for two years by which time he was musical director at the Theater an der Wien. He did not neglect the clarinet however for during his residence in Vienna he wrote his ever-popular Nonet in F major, Op. 31 (1813) for wind quintet and string quartet and its superb companion work, the Octet in E major, Op. 32 (1814). He also wrote for the basset horn in his opera Faust (1813) continuing the practice of Mozart who used these deeper toned melancholy sounding instruments (really clarinets in F) to conjure up the spirit of mystery and ritual.

Meanwhile Hermstedt did not remain faithful to Spohr for in 1812, he offered Weber a fee approaching £10 for a concerto. Weber considered the offer and worked on a concerto for a time but never completed it. Very possibly the Grand Duo Concertante (1816) may have been intended for Hermstedt because he and Weber performed it together in Prague in February 1817. By this time though Spohr had written two more works for Hermstedt: the Fantasia in B flat major, Op. 81 on a theme of *Danzi for clarinet and string quintet, and the Notturmo in C major, Op. 34 for wind band previously referred to.

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- * Peter von Winter (1754-1825) Bavarian composer of mainly operas, but also much chamber music. His most famous work is the opera 'The Interrupted Sacrifice', or generally known as the 'Opferfest'.
 - * Franz Danzi (1763-1826) An important link between the 18th century 'Mannheim' school and the Romantic German opera. Now chiefly remembered for his wind quintets.

The Fantasia (1814) is the finest of Spohr's concert pieces for the clarinet. A fiery and dramatic Allegro molto in B flat with a contrasting second theme "dolce" leads to an Andante with variations in the major key introducing the Danzi theme. The Allegro molto section returns in a shortened version modulating to G major and a concluding Andantino in B flat major. The clarinet writing is some of the most difficult passages Spohr ever wrote with much variety in the figuration. The quartet never simply accompanies but contributes significantly to the musical argument. Weber also used the same Danzi theme in his Grand Potpourri for 'cello and orchestra of 1808.

The Notturmo, Op. 34 was arranged for a variety of instrumental combinations when it was first published but the only movement to survive into the 20th century repertoire is the third movement Andante con Variazioni. This movement was arranged for clarinet and piano by the eminent German virtuoso and teacher Robert Stark (1847-1922).

In 1821 Spohr settled in Gandersheim, his parents' home town, and determined to spend the summer quietly teaching and composing. He began work on a mass for soloists and unaccompanied chorus but was interrupted by an urgent request from Hermstedt. This time, not merely content to beseech and beg, he even stooped to a little mild artistic blackmail. The directors of the baths at Alexisbad wanted Spohr to give a concert during the forthcoming season, and Hermstedt pressed Spohr for another concerto which, if it were ready in time, he would play at the concert.

Spohr's own recollections of the concert were faint when he came to write his Autobiography years later, but there can be little doubt that the concerto was a great success. Spohr had a high opinion of Hermstedt at this time. "Indisputedly", he wrote, "he is the foremost among the living virtuosos". One might say that the concerto is an artistic portrait of Hermstedt.

However, it was a hastily composed work and primarily a virtuoso piece. It is closer in style and form to the conventional Romantic concerto type; the first movement themes particularly being undistinguished.

Overall it is less interesting than the previous two concertos.

The fourth concerto, however, written seven years later is among Spohr's finest compositions. Composed in 1828 the E minor concerto received its premier in Hermstedt's hands on June 12 1829 during the Nordhausen Music Festival. The prevailing mood is one of serenity, the relaxed atmosphere of the first movement being disturbed only once by a brief outburst. The slow movement is based on a long-note theme which must have taxed even Hermstedt's considerable powers. Whereas the opening movement might be said to be mellow, the slow movement is reflective and melancholy. The finale, a 'Rondo al Espagnol' is on the surface a joyous good humoured movement, but there is an underlying feeling of sadness; the opening theme of the work is echoed in the arpeggio figuration at the close.

After the premier at Nordhausen, Hermstedt appeared with the concerto in Sondershausen and on his concert tours. Nevertheless the work remained generally unknown because Hermstedt retained possession of the manuscript until his death in 1846 (also the manuscript of the third). Spohr wrote in his autobiography that he knew nothing of the

fate of the work and it did not come to light until 1884 when Breitkopf and Hartel published a clarinet and piano edition by Spohr's pupil Carl Rundnagel. Spohr's own manuscript of the full score was discovered in 1960 in the library of the Sondershausen Wind Band by Dr. Herbert Motschmann, director of the Gotha Stadts Museum. A modern full score is now being prepared for publication by the Spohr Society so that before long this fine work will once more see the light of day (The second concerto is also being prepared for publication): after Mozart's it is certainly the most beautiful ever written for the instrument and the only one of the four written for the A clarinet.

Spohr wrote only once more for Hermstedt. This was in 1837 when he was commissioned to write his Six German Songs with clarinet obligato, Op. 103, dedicated to the Princess of Sondershausen. Spohr's characteristic 'Hermstedt' style is unmistakable and his incomparable technique is evident in the subtle interweaving of voice, clarinet and piano.

Spohr's last composition to feature the clarinet was the Septet, Op. 147 in A minor for Piano, flute, clarinet, horn, bassoon, violin and 'cello, one of Spohr's least known works, and one of his last substantial compositions. (See November/December Newsletter).

Spohr's clarinet concertos are becoming better known. Eminent clarinetists all over the world are discovering or rediscovering them, and it is the considered opinion of many that they are the peak of the genre.

All four concertos are available in clarinet and piano editions, the first concerto is available in miniature score; the second and fourth concertos are to be issued in full score by the International Spohr Society; two of the shorter pieces (Fantasie, Op. 81 and Variations, Op. 34) are still in print (see article on the Romantic Revival). The first and third concertos have been recorded, but only the first is still available. The Variations, Op. 34 will be available on record by the end of this year and there are plans to record all Spohr's music for the clarinet including the Six German Songs.

Certainly we shall be hearing a great deal more of these fine works in the future.