

THE LATE STRING QUARTETS OF LOUIS SPOHR

by Keith Warsop

WHEN we speak of Spohr's late string quartets, we refer to the final six which can be considered 'late' in the sense that they are separated from his earlier ones by a long gap in time though they themselves stretch over an 11-year period and so must not be thought of as a closely linked group like the late quartets of Beethoven. In fact they divide fairly clearly into two sets, the first three, composed between 1846 and 1851, which have things in common thematically and formally, and the final three from 1855-57 which represent an attempt by Spohr to move on to new ground.

In his first decade in Kassel from 1822 Spohr composed 12 quartets, which included two *quatuors brillants*, to add to the 17 he had already written previously. However, after completing the third and final quartet of the Op.84 set in March 1832 he added only his sixth and last *quatuor brillant*, A major, Op.93, in September-October 1835 before turning away from the genre for more than 10 years.

This lengthy period can be put down to Spohr's second marriage in 1836 following the 1834 death of his first wife, Dorette Scheidler. His new wife, Marianne Pfeiffer, was an accomplished amateur pianist who had developed a particular skill in sight reading and for some years Spohr concentrated on chamber works involving the piano. This initially led to three large-scale duos concertantes for violin and piano then, between 1841 and 1849, he embarked on a sequence of five piano trios as well as his single Piano Sonata in A flat major, Op.125, in 1843 and a Piano Quintet in D minor, Op.130, in 1845.

Chamber music for strings did not entirely disappear from Spohr's output as he wrote his String Quintet No.5 in G minor, Op.106, in 1838 and No.6 in E minor in 1845, but no quartets until the February of 1846. This was Op.132 which followed immediately on the heels of his Quartet-Concerto in A minor, Op.131, composed in November and December 1845 and the work on this may have rekindled his appetite for the string quartet itself.

In order to avoid clumsiness in what follows the six quartets will be referred to in the main simply by their opus numbers so we set out here their full details:

No.31 in A major, Op.132 (February 1846)

1. Allegro vivace (A major)
2. Adagio (D minor)
3. Scherzo: Vivace (A minor); Trio (A major)
4. Finale: Allegro molto (A major)

No.32 in C major, Op.141 (February 1849)

1. Allegro moderato (C major)
2. Larghetto (F major)
3. Scherzo: Allegro (C minor); Trio (A flat major)
4. Finale: Presto (C major)

No.33 in G major, Op.146 (October-November 1851)

1. Allegro (G major)
2. Adagio molto (C minor)
3. Scherzo: Presto (G major); Trio (C major)

4. Finale: Molto allegro (G minor)

No.34 in E flat major, Op.152 (June-July 1855)

1. Adagio—Allegro (E flat major)

2. Larghetto con moto (A flat major)

3. Menuetto (E flat major); Trio (A flat major)

4. Finale: Allegro (E flat major)

No.35 in E flat major, Op.155/WoO 41 (autumn 1856)

1. Allegro (E flat major)

2. Romanze: Andantino (B flat major)

3. Menuetto: Moderato (G major); Trio (C major)

4. Finale: Allegro non troppo (E flat major)

No.36 in G minor, Op.157/WoO 42 (summer 1857)

1. Allegro (G minor)

2. Larghetto (E flat major)

3. Menuetto (G minor); Trio: Un poco più moderato (C major)

4. Finale: Allegro molto (G minor)

These late quartets have not usually been included among lists of Spohr's most outstanding compositions though there have been some differing evaluations of their qualities. The most severe was Hans Glenewinkel in his magisterial survey of Spohr's chamber music for strings in which he covered not only all 36 quartets but also the seven quintets, the sextet and the four double quartets.

In line with his general theory about the long, slow decline of Spohr's inspiration (though not his workmanship) from about 1834, Glenewinkel suggested that the recurring characteristics of these late chamber works were 'dryness, a sober, rather wooden manner and a lack of flexibility.' For example, in his summing up of Op.141 he says that, while the thematic development was more lively than in Op.132, 'the lack of intellectual content is particularly apparent as regards invention.'

Clive Brown is more discriminating. With Op.132, he feels that 'the thematic material is often merely undistinguished and the rhythmic pulse lacking in variety', though he finds the *Adagio* 'deeply expressive' while the finale, though vigorous and attractive, offers nothing new. However, he views Op.141 as far more successful than its predecessor and feels that it contains many highly effective ideas but he is less enthusiastic about Op.146 which he judges to be uneven in quality. He echoes Glenewinkel in finding the Scherzo and Finale as being more satisfactory than the first movement and agrees with him by declaring that the *Adagio molto* 'can stand comparison with the best of its kind among Spohr's output.'

Bertrand Jacobs comes up with a different opinion. He says that Op.141 'as successful as it is, is surpassed by the next, Op.146. I consider Op.146 the best of the late quartets', though he thinks that the *Larghetto* of Op.141 is an inspired movement, the opening one well written, the Scherzo with its Spanish bolero rhythm a great success and the finale has all parts well developed. Turning to Op.132, he finds the *Adagio* and Scherzo notable with the Trio of the Scherzo being especially charming, though the work as a whole is judged inferior to Op.141.

In many ways these three quartets inhabit the same world as most of Spohr's other chamber works from the 1840s; the piano trios, Piano Quintet, Fourth Double Quartet and Sixth String Quintet with perhaps only the Sextet and the Seventh String Quintet standing slightly apart from this group. The elements in common are fuller textures, increased chromaticism, some degree of thematic unity and more standardised broad formal structure.

This element can be found in all three quartets which have outer movements in sonata form

with a repeated exposition while the slow movements all come second and the third movements are Scherzos. In finer details and more subtle nuances, however, plenty of variety can be discovered. Thus, the Scherzo of Op.132 is marked to be repeated after the Trio, giving a form of A-B-A, but in Op.141 the Trio returns after the Scherzo repeat and there is also a coda so that the form is A-B-A-B-Coda, and this procedure is also used in Op.146.

Similar nuances are found in the other movements; the first subject does not open the finale of Op.132 but only appears after a recurring arpeggio figure launches the proceedings. In the first movement of Op.141, the development concentrates on an important staccato linking motif along with the markedly melodic second subject, whereas in Op.146 a staccato/trill motif from the first subject and a sequential quaver pattern from the closing bars of the second subject dominate the lengthy development.

So there is much of interest in Spohr's treatment of his material in these quartets which give the lie to Glenewinkel's assertion that by this stage the composer's ability to handle form and develop his themes had atrophied. There is also much fascinating harmonic treatment and here Glenewinkel points to a foreshadowing of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* at one point in the *Adagio* of Op.132.

Perhaps one reason why Glenewinkel undervalued these late quartets so much is that he overlooked the Brahms dimension. Clive Brown has noted how, especially in Op.141 (and the same applies to Op.146), Spohr anticipates Brahms in the sound and texture of his music, whereas Glenewinkel does not refer to the quartets of Brahms at all throughout his 144-page study.

Staying with Op.141 and Op.146, it is noticeable that Spohr comes much closer to the traditional balance of the four instruments than in many of his earlier quartets where, even in the best of them, a few bars at least of virtuoso passagework can be found. In Op.146 especially this sort of passagework is completely absent and this is also extremely limited in Op.141. In Op.132, however, we have a special case as Spohr designed the work to have a 'brilliant' first violin part. It certainly dominates the ensemble but avoids the virtuoso flourishes we might expect from such a role. Instead, it is involved more with technically demanding motivic and developmental matters and in effect keeps up a running commentary on the progress of the music throughout.

Some other positive matters worth pointing out in these three quartets include the contrapuntal intensification in the development of the otherwise relaxed and low-key first movement of Op.132, as well as the fantasia-like atmosphere generated in the same quartet's finale through the use of the arpeggiated violin figure which opens out the basic sonata form of the movement and which has the last word as it heads towards emphatic *fortissimo* chords followed by a final two-bar fade-out (even here, Glenewinkel cannot avoid being critical, suggesting that the themes are merely 'higher salon music').

In Op.141's finale there is the three-note figure which opens the movement successively on each of the four instruments and is then used to generate many of the finale's components; in Op.146, the beautiful and touchingly intimate lament sung out on the violin's G string in the *Adagio molto* and, in the finale, the two-note figure which heads both of the two main subjects and shows some affinity with the technique used in the previous quartet's finale with its three-note figure.

Turning to the three final quartets, they mainly correspond with the previous three by being in four movements with the opening one using sonata form and a repeated exposition while the slow ones are in second place. However, these slow movements are less intense and broad in tempo than their predecessors with Op.132, Op.141 and Op.146 being, respectively, *Adagio*, *Larghetto* and *Adagio molto*, while these last three are *Larghetto con moto*, *Andantino* and

Larghetto. We also notice that in all three, the Scherzo has been jettisoned in favour of a Menuetto.

The most important feature about these three final quartets is their difference from the previous three. It is clear that Spohr was intent on breaking new ground and his first attempt to do this was in Op.152. The very opening is in stark contrast to the earlier ones as we have an *Adagio* slow introduction, the only one in the six late quartets. Syncopations and dissonances show Spohr attempting to move into an area closer to the modern younger generation.

The thematic unity of the *Adagio* with the main material of the following *Allegro* is closer than ever with the second subject, especially, being transplanted from the slow introduction. With the bridging material between the two main themes Spohr shuns his traditional passagework. Instead, he appears to have been listening to Mendelssohn's quartets for he produces a busy, semiquaver buzzing effect with alternations of contrasting bowings.

In the development section Spohr springs a surprise; after only eight bars concentrating on the first subject, a new figure appears, developed from the slow introduction and this forms the basis of an extended fugato. In contrast, the recapitulation is fairly regular though the final bars again refer back to the motif from the *Adagio*.

The *Larghetto con moto* avoids the lyrical cantabile line of many Spohr slow movements and instead has a sad, troubled air which is blown away by the skipping Menuetto which follows. As Glenewinkel points out, a bizarrely restless yet attractive effect is produced by the opening dotted rocking accompanying motif contending with the main theme for melodic prominence. The Spohr of old returns in the Trio where the first violin plays a folksong-like melody in demanding double-stops but this shows that the composer's gift for melody has not deserted him and it would slot easily into one of his earlier quartets.

Glenewinkel is particularly severe on the finale which he describes as 'the most insignificant of all the movements' but he fails to notice the emotional direction of the movement in which Spohr introduces a lighter, even frivolous tone which eventually cannot be sustained. This lighter touch peters out early in the development to be succeeded by more serious fugal material. The lighter touch returns for the recapitulation but as it heads towards the conclusion this more serious tone reappears and the work closes with a diminuendo to a minor key plagal cadence. Spohr has found that frivolity cannot prevail and the troubled mood found earlier in the quartet cannot be so easily overcome.

Although one enthusiast wrote to Spohr to praise Op.152 and say: 'Your latest creation is quite delightful ... the charming first movement, the moving, richly harmonic *Adagio*, the playful, witty Scherzo with its wonderful Trio...', for his next quartet the composer turned away from the path he had taken with Op.152. Instead, as Glenewinkel has stated, Spohr returned to the ideals of his youth to follow the classical models of Haydn and Mozart. In terms of structure and texture he comes close to this while retaining many features of his individual style, especially in melody and harmony. However, though the light, more transparent texture gives the work a fresher feeling than the previous four quartets, of course we have to lose the richness of these earlier ones.

The *Romanze: Andantino* is a beautiful movement while we find the 72-year-old composer bubbling over with youthful high spirits in the sparkling finale. The quartet's original G minor tonality leaves its impress on the formally rather confused opening *Allegro* in the revised E flat version but with the finale originally in G major, there is no doubt that this work was never designed to develop tragic overtones. In Op.157, as befits its G minor tonality, there is a more serious demeanour and the first movement is notable for its persistent syncopation. The highlight is the masterly *Larghetto*, part of which Glenewinkel suggested is like a pre-echo of Grieg.

After having looked closely at these six works the question remains over where they stand in

Spohr's overall string quartet output. One pointer is that Op.141 has been performed a number of times in live concerts in recent years which surely means that its status must be ranked quite high as even the best of Spohr's earlier quartets rarely achieve this accolade. As Op.146 is about its equal, especially because of its outstanding slow movement and finale these two, at least, should be included in the select list of Spohr's best quartets.

The relaxed first movement of Op.132 puts this quartet on a lower level though the musical quality of the remainder is much higher but the dominance of the first violin must always restrict its live outings. On the other hand, Op.152 is grossly underestimated. It is a fascinating work which stands up well in performance and has the added interest of showing Spohr introducing some new and exciting elements to his compositional repertoire.

The two last quartets are certainly thoroughly enjoyable and have deservedly been resurrected despite Spohr's own embargo, though the composer himself seemed to vacillate over their quality. In November 1857 we find him writing to a friend that 'they seem good enough to be added to the others' but, according to the final pages added to his *Autobiography* by his family, he 'expressed the wish to his wife that neither should at any time be made public'.

We believe that this change of heart happened in 1858 when Spohr fell into a deep depression after he had to give up playing the violin because of a broken arm and found that he was no longer able to compose satisfactorily. Depression or not, he may have come to feel that they lacked the range and intensity of the best of the earlier quartets though the opening movement of Op.157 gives the impression that if Spohr had been spared to compose more quartets he would have used his 'renewed' musical language to explore more weighty matters.

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Discography

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