

SCHUMANN ON SPOHR: EXTRACTS FROM 'MUSIC AND MUSICIANS'

by Mike Jarman

IT WAS in 1830, having taken lodgings in the house of Friedrich Wieck, that Schumann formed the plan of establishing his journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (I, xii — see Note at the end of this essay for the method of referencing). In 1853 he collected his essays in the *Neue Zeitschrift* into the literary work *Music and Musicians* and it was shortly after this that the illness which was to dominate the final three years of his life really took hold (I, xxiii).

Encouraged by a letter to her in 1871 from Schumann's widow Clara, Fanny Raymond Ritter undertook the task of translating Schumann's entire collection of essays and reviews as arranged by him. However, advised against the idea of publishing these in full, lest the complete work would be too much for the general public in England or America, she decided on a selection of about half the entire work.

This was published under the title *Music and Musicians, Essays and Criticisms* by Robert Schumann, translated, edited and annotated by Fanny Raymond Ritter, First Series. Following a favourable critical reception of this first selection, Ritter brought out a further selection from her translations that became the Second Series under the same title.

In 1840 Schumann had begun to yield to advice to limit his editorial activities to devote himself to composition and a year later resigned his editorship, thereafter contributing only a few articles to the *Neue Zeitschrift* (I, xxviii-xxix). The period covered by Ritter's translations reflect this, the first articles dating from 1831 and the last from 1843, though as not all articles and events are dated, it is difficult to be precise about the exact period covered without recourse to the issues of the *Neue Zeitschrift* itself.

The arrangement of the material differs markedly between the two series. The First Series consists of selection of articles arranged into chapters, roughly but not entirely in chronological order, and often with only a loose or no connecting theme between successive articles. In the Second Series, material is systematically grouped according to forms of musical composition, e.g. operas followed by oratorios, symphonies, concertos, songs, chamber music, sonatas and then other forms of piano music.

The volumes lack indices, so to find references to an individual composer one must read the whole text. References to source material and footnotes are also largely lacking. Despite these drawbacks, these translations by Ritter give much more comprehensive coverage than do more recent ones and therefore are to be preferred for reference purposes.

This essay aims to extract and summarise from these two volumes of *Music and Musicians* references to Spohr and his works. In doing so I have worked from the Second Edition of the First Series dated 1878 and the Third Edition of the Second Series, the publication date of which is not given but the Translator's Preface is dated 1880.

The references to Spohr are considered in two parts. Firstly there are the works reviewed in detail which I have included in full. Secondly there are the incidental references to Spohr scattered throughout the two volumes where I have necessarily been selective, not including every mention of Spohr, but sufficient to indicate that he would have been an ever-present eminent figure in the background of Schumann's musical life.

The five full-scale reviews are of Spohr's Symphony No.4 in F major, Op.86, called here *The*

Consecration of Tones (I, 312-314), his Sixth and Seventh Symphonies (II, 58-63), the Piano Trio in E minor, Op.119 (II, 193-195) and a string quartet (II, 203-205). The last-mentioned work, given incorrectly as Op.97, is in fact the *quatuor brillant* in A major, Op.93.

One of Schumann's most famous reviews, made after the Leipzig performance of Spohr's *Historical Symphony* with its comparison between Spohr's well-recognised musical style and Napoleon's attempt to be anonymous at a masked ball does not appear here as Ritter omitted it from her translations. Instead she included a further review written when the score was later published in which Schumann softens his view of the finale. The full-scale reviews now follow:
The Consecration of Tones (first performance in Leipzig in February 1835)

In order to describe this symphony well to one who has not heard it, one should give the subject a poetical form for the third time; for the poet owes his inspired thanks once more for the art with which Spohr has translated his words into music.

If we could find a hearer, uninstructed by the poem or the different headings to the movements of the symphony, able to give us a description of the pictures called up before him by the work, it would be a partial test of the composer's success in the fulfilment of his undertaking. Unfortunately for myself I knew the design of the symphony beforehand, and was reluctantly obliged to throw the material garment of Pfeiffer's poetry [Author's note: Carl Pfeiffer (1803-31), a poet in Kassel, Spohr's librettist, whose sister Marianne became Spohr's second wife.] over the musical forms that obtruded themselves only too distinctly on my imagination.

Setting all this aside, I will touch on something quite different today. But if I handle somewhat freely the setting to music of just *this* text, and the inner essence of the idea, it must yet be understood that no attack is intended on what is in other respects a musical masterwork.

Beethoven understood the danger he ran with his *Pastoral Symphony*. In the few words with which he headed it, 'Rather expressive of the feeling than tone painting' lies an entire aesthetic system for composers. But how absurd it is of painters to make portraits of him sitting beside a brook, his head in his hands, listening to the bubbling water! With this symphony, I thought the aesthetic danger would be still greater.

If any composer ever differed from another, if any one ever remained true to himself from the first tone on, it is Spohr, with his fine immortal lament. But as he looks at everything as though through tears, his figures run into each other like formless ethereal shapes, for which we can scarcely find a name. It is a continuous resonance certainly, held together by the hand and mind of an artist — we all know that.

Later he threw his powers into the opera. And as nothing better can be recommended to an overweening lyric poet than to study dramatic models, and to make dramatic attempts himself, in order to gain greater formative strength, it was to be expected that the opera, in which he would be obliged to follow the situations, and to carry out actions and character, would tear him from his visionary uniformity. *Jessonda* seems the very growth of his own heart.

Yet after this he remained the same in his instrumental works; his third symphony possesses but an outward difference from his first. He felt he must dare to take a new step. It was perhaps the example of Beethoven's ninth symphony — the first movement of which contains perhaps the same poetic ground-thought as Spohr's first [presumably the first movement of Spohr's Fourth is meant; author] — that induced him to take refuge in poetry.

And what a peculiar choice he made — how true to his nature, to his being! He did not grasp Shakespeare, Schiller, or Goethe, but a poem more formless than music itself (if this is not too boldly said); a poem in praise of music, and painting its effects; eulogising music with music. When Beethoven caught and expressed his own thoughts in the *Pastoral Symphony*, it was not a single, short day that inspired him with his cry of joy, but the dark commingling of lofty songs

above us (as Heine, I think, says somewhere); the eternal-voiced creation moved around him. The poet of the *Consecration of Tones* caught these up in a somewhat dull mirror; and Spohr again reflected that which he found mirrored within it.

But I, who look up with veneration to the creator of this symphony, may not accord the rank it deserves as a work of art among recent musical creations. I leave judgment to the famous veteran [Ignaz von Seyfried of Vienna] who has already promised to declare his views upon the work in our paper.

Symphony No.6 in G major, Op.116, and Symphony No.7 in C major, Op.121

We have before us two new symphonies by Spohr, written within the short period of three years. The first of these — sixth of the seven he has written — his *Historical Symphony* (op.116) was extensively reviewed in our paper at the time of its first performance in Leipzig. We can scarcely add anything respecting it to what we said then, even after studying the published symphony.

Of course we are certain to discover more fine features in a work by Spohr the more we become acquainted with it and therefore we must somewhat modify the judgment we then expressed regarding the last movement of the symphony to which we then attributed an ironical meaning, while we now consider this mirror of the present as much less cutting.

And have not many things altered during the last three years? Would not Spohr have written differently now? Yes, we hope that the evening of the worthy master's life will be warmed by the first rays of a better epoch than that which he has characterised in the closing movement of his symphony.

Spohr has more finely expressed himself in his latest symphony, to which we devote a few words, — a few, for who can say anything in his praise that has not already been said? The work is in many ways remarkable, and to the originality of its invention, form, and expression, can only be compared to Spohr's earlier symphony, *The consecration of tones*. As in that, he has here selected a subject, to which he gives the rather ordinary title *The earthly and the Divine in human life*, worked out in three movements, to each of which he affixes a separate motto. In other words, the first movement depicts childhood, the second the dangers of youth and manhood, the third represents the victory of good over evil.

We confess to a prejudice against this manner of creation, which we share, perhaps, with a hundred learned heads, whose notions about composition are no doubt wonderful, and who are always calling on the name of Mozart, who thought about nothing at all when he wrote his music.

However, some who are not learned also entertain this prejudice, and when a composer presents us with a programme before we have heard the music, I say, 'First let me hear whether you have written beautiful music, and then I shall be happy to read your programme. There is a difference when Goethe, or another, poetises on pre-arranged end-rhymes. So no one will be able to philosophise away the beauties of Spohr's music; for it is one thing when he chooses, exceptionally, to set himself a task and it is another when it is done by a beginner in art.

This question has been discussed already, *apropos* of *The consecration of tones* and the battle is again being waged about, 'You ought not to think of anything when you compose,' and the contrary. Philosophers imagine the question to be worse than it is; they are certainly mistaken in supposing that a composer who works according to an idea, sets himself down like a preacher on Saturday afternoon, portions out his task in the customary three parts, and works it up accordingly.

The creative imagination of a musician is something very different, and though a picture, an idea, may float before him, he is only happy in his labour when this idea comes to him clothed in lovely melodies, and borne by the same invisible hands that bore the 'golden bucket' spoken of somewhere by Goethe. So keep to your prejudices if you will, but do not allow the master to

suffer on account of the failures of students. We may say, in a few words, that there is a magic about Spohr's new symphony, such as we have not found in any of his others. We do not discover any great and novel ideas in it, differing from those we are accustomed to in Spohr; but it would be difficult to find such pure transfiguration of tone elsewhere. To enhance the charm of his colouring, the composer has made use of two orchestras, and this is one of those ideas that do not enter everyone's head; or, if a composer does think of it, he drops it afterwards, for very good reasons.

For if a master is needed to accompany the orchestration of a symphony, how much more accomplished must he be when he successfully makes use of a double orchestra? The undertaking will not meet with many imitators, and, in a certain sense, this is not desirable.

It would be interesting to know what Beethoven would have made out of such an idea. Might we not have obtained the greatest results from him? We rather felt he would never have felt the need of making use of such a means. This seems more suited to a master in the fine and delicate, than to that of the powerful Beethoven. As we have already mentioned in our paper, it was Spohr who wrote the first double quartet.

So we have two orchestras in the symphony, one of them somewhat obligato, and simply made up, without brass or instruments of percussion, the other of the usual strong components, with oboes and fagottoes, that always play unisono. This uncommon kind of instrumentation will be an obstacle to the general performance of the work; but on the whole it is not as difficult as *The consecration of tones*.

The symphony also differs in many points from the usual cut, both in form and the succession of movements; the first, a picture of happy childhood, is an *allegretto* after a slow introduction. We award the prize for this; for in it, on green fields stretched far around us, under a cloudless heaven, numberless children are sporting; among them we perceive the master, with his smiling yet melancholy eye, reflecting on his own childhood.

We have already spoken of the character of the second movement, as sketched in its motto. It is a good description of the meaning intended; the dulled, doubting commencement is followed by a passionate *allegro*, through this also the noble master seems to look pityingly upon the errors of his darling — that is, supposing the symphony has a hero.

Only one passage in the symphony displeases me, which does not seem to have produced the effect the composer intended. It is the solo of the violin of the first orchestra, which sounds thin, and disappears among the masses of the others. This could easily have been strengthened, but the composer seems to insist on having his idea played by one alone, and we think we understand him. And therefore directors, when studying the work, should see that the second orchestra restrains its strength as much as possible.

In the third movement, we find the poet in his accustomed sphere; evil disappears, and the powers of good are victorious. The invention of the theme reminds us of other things by Spohr, especially of the last movement of the trio in E minor, probably written at about the same time — and the close also reminds us of the *Consecration of tones*, without, however, failing to produce a fine impression.

Thus the master closes. Let us follow him, whether in art or life, in all his endeavours. The industry to which every line in the score testifies, is almost touching. May he, among our other great German masters, ever be to us a shining example!

Piano Trio in E minor, Op.119

So far as we know, this trio is the first which the admired master has written. We must repeat the same observation which we made at the commencement of our article on Marschner's trio. One feature which separates the masters of the German school from those of the French and the Italian

— a feature that has made them great — the former use their powers in every mode of construction, while the others usually confine themselves to one branch. When we hear some favourite Parisian opera composer entitled a great artist, we feel inclined to ask, ‘Where are his symphonies, quartets, psalms, &c?’ How can they be compared to German masters?

Spohr has worked in almost every form, from the oratorio to the lied, from the symphony to the rondo for a single instrument; and this many-sidedness is not his smallest claim to admiration; and therefore we greet this new gift as a fresh blossom from his rich mind; one that may well be interwoven amidst the garland of his creations.

To be sure, we are already familiar with the colour and perfume. But this artist’s mind seems inexhaustible in its depths; though he ever remains himself, he always knows how to fetter our interest. Spohr might publish anything without the necessity of putting his name to it; he would be instantly recognised.

The same thing cannot be truly said of any other artist of today. But our interest in his creations is founded on something more; that is not the mere magic of his individuality, but his perfect artistic finish, the purely musical beauties that contrast with the characteristics of his individuality.

It is possible for a remarkable character to strike us in music, while the music itself may be lacking in mastership. Spohr gives us everything in a masterly form, and he even clothes familiar things in carefully chosen and altered surroundings. He is never weary of bestowing the greatest possible perfection on his works. See, for example, how he newly harmonises the first thema of the first movement of his trio as often as it appears. A more easily satisfied artist would have done it in the same way every time, without further trouble.

Few persons have any idea of the conscious industry of this composer, which seems rather to have increased rather than fallen off with added years; but it revenges itself in his works. And it is quite unnecessary for us to praise Spohr’s artistic virtues; the world has long been agreed on that point.

This trio is also an honour to its master; it is cast in one mould from beginning to end, and only the *adagio* is, according to our opinion, a trifle dull. The other movements have very original traits; the first is a fine web, artistically carried out by a certain hand. The scherzo is one of Spohr’s best; we desire to hear it over and over again. The motivo of the last movement is one that has become almost universal through Spohr himself, but the whole sweeps on in an extraordinary manner. The violoncello *pizzicato* it is impossible to forget, or the finely interwoven melody from the *adagio*.

We do not need to express the general character of the trio. We find Spohr in the first, in the second movements, and everywhere. If Schiller’s ‘I know nothing finer, long as I may seek and choose,’ suits anyone, it suits Spohr. Long may he yet labour among us!

Quatuor brillant in A major, Op.93

Our quartettists then played a new one (Op.97 [sic]) by Spohr, in which the well-known master greeted us from the very first measure. We soon perceived that a brilliant display of the first violin was more the object here than an artistic interweaving of the four parts. Nothing can be said against this manner of quartet writing, which makes great demands on a composer, when it is done openly and naturally.

Forms, changes, modulations, melodic entrances, all were in the well-known Spohr manner, and it seems as if the quartettists were discoursing in the work of a very well-known subject. A scherzo — not exactly this master’s strong point — is wanting, but the whole possesses a contemplative didactic character. In the rondo we are attracted by a very pretty theme, which, however, needs a second more marked one as a pendant. The following remark was suggested

to me by a complaint by one of the quartet players. Young artists, who always desire something novel, and, if possible, eccentric, esteem too highly the easily-conceived and perfected works of finished masters, and are greatly mistaken in supposing that they could accomplish the same thing equally well. The difference between master and scholar can never be overcome.

The hastily thrown off piano sonatas of Beethoven, and still more those of Mozart, are equal proofs in their heavenly ease of their masters' pre-eminence, as are their deeper manifestations; finished mastery plays loosely about the lines drawn from the beginning of the work, while younger, more uncultivated talent, whenever it leaves the foothold of custom, strains ever tighter at the yoke until misfortune is the result.

To apply this remark to Spohr's quartet; if we forget the composer's name and his famous achievements, we still find a masterly form, invention, and mode of writing as far removed as heaven itself from that of the scribbler or student. The advantage of the superiority won by means of study and industry is, that it remains ductile even to advanced age, while superficial talent loses facility through neglect.

Other Spohr references

Turning now to a selection of the incidental references to Spohr and his works distributed throughout the two volumes, some also refer to Spohr's symphonies, in particular the Fourth. In an extensive commentary on the 'Symphony by Hector Berlioz', Op.4, subsequently of course known as the *Symphonie Fantastique*, (I, 228-259) the problem faced by composers of symphonies after Beethoven's Ninth is discussed, noting that in this 'outwardly the greatest instrumental work, limit and proportion appear to be exhausted'.

Among many other composers who had written symphonies subsequent to Beethoven's Ninth is mentioned (I, 229) 'Spohr, whose tender language did not echo loudly enough in the great vault of the symphony where he spoke' and the further point is made that none of the composers still living (in 1835 when this review was written) 'had ventured to make any essential alterations in the old form, save for a few alterations such as we find in Spohr's latest symphony' (referring here to the Fourth).

This symphony is referred to again in a chapter dated 1843 on Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music (I, 278-280) where it is noted (I, 280) that the march in that work 'somewhat resembles the march in Spohr's *Consecration of Tones* and might have been more original.'

Staying, albeit indirectly, with the theme of Spohr's symphonies, an account of the Gewandhaus concerts given in Leipzig in 1837 includes the following (I, 371): 'In a fantastic prelude to Raupach's *Daughter of Air* by Spohr, his well-known originality was more than ever prominent; while in his elegiac violins, his sighing clarionets, we recognised once more the noble, suffering Spohr.' It was, of course, this work that Spohr was to develop into the first movement of his Fifth Symphony (Clive Brown also features these comments in his Spohr biography, p.241, ref.11).

Other Spohr works that featured in 'evening entertainments' in Leipzig besides the Gewandhaus concerts were the nonet and an unspecified double quartet as well as his *rondo à la Spagnuola* for violin and piano, 'a very tender and impulsive piece.' (Clive Brown identifies this as Op.111 composed in April 1839).

Numerous other examples from the two volumes illustrate the esteem in which Schumann obviously held the older master. Of the first Gewandhaus concerts held under Mendelssohn's direction in Leipzig in October 1835 we read (I, 35) of the hall being haunted by the spirits of 'those few gifted ones to whom was granted the great privilege of enchanting and elevating the minds of hundreds at the same moment.' Among these he mentions Spohr, coupling his name

(as he often does elsewhere) with that of Weber. Referring (I, 131) to ‘all the gifted ones who have borne the German name of Ludwig’ among whom he includes Spohr, he writes: ‘What noble souls would arise at the call and gaze at each other joyfully.’ Of course, Spohr himself always used the French version of his name, Louis, so one does not automatically think of him as a ‘German Ludwig’.

In praising Sterndale Bennett’s overture *The Wood Nymphs*, Op.20, he also incidentally praises Spohr (along with Mendelssohn), writing (I, 223) that ‘save Spohr and Mendelssohn, what other living composer is so completely master of his pencil, or bestows with it such tenderness and grace of colour, as Bennett?’

Schumann is not, however, entirely uncritical of Spohr. Under the heading ‘Aphorisms’ he observes (I, 73): ‘Mannerism is already displeasing in the original, to say nothing of the same fault in copyists [Spohr and his pupils].’ Reviewing Danish opera (1840), specifically *The Raven* by J.P.E.Hartmann, he says (II, 11-12): ‘A preference for Weber often betrays itself, and Spohr is apparently one of the composer’s favourites.’

However after noting ‘an often too quickly changing harmonic progression is peculiar to Herr Hartmann’ he appears to go on to criticise Spohr’s influence on him by stating: ‘How effective is a simple triad, when freely and naturally sung by the human voice! All the enharmonic art of Spohr is as nothing beside Handel’s flowering thirds.’

At other times his comments are neutral in tone, simply noting the extent of Spohr’s influence on other composers, though there can be an implied criticism of the excessive reliance of the composer in question on Spohr’s example. For instance, of Reissiger’s First Symphony we read (II, 44): ‘In the first movement we have one of those violin themes in swift figuration, peculiar to Spohr’, and further that there are too strong and frequent reminiscences of other composers so that ‘if they were put aside, the symphony would lose half its contents. Thus in the first page we have Beethoven, in the *allegro* Spohr — Mendelssohn immediately after — in the Scherzo we meet Beethoven and Spohr again, and in such striking manner — the latter in the trio, that imitates one of Spohr’s best known and efficient instrumental effects.’

Of Adolph Hesse’s Third Symphony in B minor (II, 54) we read: ‘The composer lives so entirely on and by Spohr’ and that ‘he must free himself from one-sided admiration of his teacher — let him give us rather a Hesse overture than three Spohr-Hesse symphonies.’ Revisiting Reissiger (II, 208-209), this time his Quartet, Op.111, we find it described as being ‘certainly interspersed with familiar things that remind us of Spohr’ (among other composers).

In summary, numerous examples in these two volumes attest to the importance of Spohr in the musical world of the period. It is perhaps unfortunate for his later reputation that so many of the composers he influenced and mentored subsequently sank into obscurity without fulfilling the initial promise that Schumann saw in them when he included them in his reviews. Had even one of them become one of the leaders of the next generation of composers, we would not have had to wait so long to see the first signs of a real revival of interest in Spohr.

Note

Almost all material cited in this essay is taken directly from the two volumes of *Music and Musicians* and individual extracts are referenced in the text where they occur by volume, i.e. either First Series (I) or Second Series (II), followed by the page number(s), for example (I, 312-314). I have quoted texts as they are given in the Ritter translations, without attempts to modernise the English, except for an occasional replacement of older usages, e.g. Leipsic by Leipzig, quartette by quartet.