

# SPOHR'S HISTORICAL SYMPHONY AND A LIGHT MUSIC COUNTERPART

By Keith Warsop

**A**LTHOUGH SPOHR'S *Historical Symphony* pioneered the process of working with musical styles from earlier eras, such as Tchaikovsky's *Mozartiana*, Grieg's *Holberg Suite*, Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto* and *Pulcinella* or Casella's *Scarlattiana*, no composer has since followed his example by writing a symphony in 'the style and taste of four different periods', as Spohr subtitled his composition.

However, in the field of English light music, Spohr's model was followed by Eric Coates (1886-1957) who in 1941 composed his *Four Centuries Suite* which, to paraphrase Spohr, covered dance music in 'the style and taste of four different periods'.

As a professional viola player in his early career with Sir Thomas Beecham's orchestra from its first outing on January 25, 1909, and then with Henry Wood's Queen's Hall Orchestra from 1910 to 1919. Coates would not have encountered much Spohr in the concerts of these two conductors though Wood did direct the *Jessonda* overture in a Promenade Concert in October 1909.

But it is highly probable that he would have come across Spohr, by name at least, as a viola and composition student at London's Royal Academy of Music from September 1906 to May 1908, where he would also have surely have heard of the *Historical Symphony*, if only as a curiosity.

By the time Coates came up with his idea for his *Four Centuries*, he was the king of English light music. His *Knightsbridge March* had propelled him to national fame when it was used as the signature tune for the popular BBC radio programme *In Town Tonight* from 1933, and his 1940 march *Calling All Workers* achieved similar status as the signature tune for *Music While You Work*, another highly popular BBC programme which ran until 1967. Just around the corner was the use of his 1930 Valse *Serenade By the Sleepy Lagoon* to introduce *Desert Island Discs* from January 1942 and still running on BBC radio to this day with the Coates piece remaining as its signature tune.

Coates' success with his marches led to a number of commissions for similar works for the opening of various television channels after the war and then to his most famous work, his *Dam Busters March*, written in 1954 for inclusion in the film of the same name.

Because of the disruption caused by the London blitz and Coates' subsequent relocation from the capital to the Buckinghamshire town of Amersham, work on the suite did not begin in earnest until the late summer of 1941; it was completed on November 6. In his 1952 autobiography (yes, like Spohr he wrote his memoirs) *Suite in Four Movements*, Coates says:

"The long delay before I was able to put my ideas down had been the means of 'Four Centuries' growing in my mind so completely that the actual orchestrating was not unlike musical dictation. The writing-room in our temporary house in Buckinghamshire, after we had been there a couple of weeks and I had become accustomed to its atmosphere, was literally impregnated with musical sounds, and the next two months saw me, day in, day out, working on the score ... [I] was writing in ideal circumstances."

Like Spohr, Coates enlarged the orchestra in each movement as the periods progressed. The four movements of the *Historical Symphony*, with the scoring, are:

1. Bach-Handel Period 1720 (2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns/strings);
2. Haydn-Mozart Period 1780 (2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns/strings);
3. Beethoven Period 1810 (2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, timpani/strings);
4. The Very Latest Period 1840 (1 piccolo, 1 flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, triangle, side drum, cymbals, bass drum/strings).

Similar details for the *Four Centuries Suite* are:

1. 17th Century: Prelude and Hornpipe (2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns/strings);
2. 18th Century: Pavane and Tambourin (2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, triangle, tambourine/strings);
3. 19th Century: Valse (2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, harp, percussion/strings);
4. 20th Century: Rhythm (1 piccolo doubling flute, 1 flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 3 saxophones, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, large percussion section including glockenspiel and vibraphone/strings).

Interestingly enough, both composers use fugal technique in their movements which go the furthest back in time, Spohr in the Bach section of 'Bach-Handel', and Coates in the *Hornpipe* part of '17th Century'. In his definitive *The Life and Music of Eric Coates* (2012), Michael Payne describes what happens: "The Hornpipe is a real tour de force of contrapuntal writing ... [it] is a set of variations, opening with a strict four-part fugal exposition, giving way to a series of twelve variations, each brimming with contrapuntal ingenuity and imitation."

Spohr's slow movement, 'Haydn-Mozart', offers the composer's take on the Viennese classical style while for his '18th Century', Coates opens with a *Pavane*, his only substantial sequence of music totally in a minor key, before moving on to a *Tambourin*, a dance form more associated with France than the Vienna classics.

With his third movement, 'Beethoven', Spohr gives us a *Scherzo*, a form practically invented by Beethoven, while for his '19th Century', Coates turns to a *Valse* (his spelling), a dance which grew to have enormous popularity during the course of those hundred years.

Turning to the finales, whereas it is generally believed that Spohr's 'The Very Latest Period' was meant in satirical vein as a send-up of the French orchestral music of the time involving such composers as Auber and Meyerbeer, Coates, in '20th Century: *Rhythm*', pays a genuine tribute to the dance bands of the 1930s with the introduction of saxophones, muted trumpets and drumming patterns associated with that style. Coates and his wife were keen dancers, frequently visiting the Mayfair clubs and hotels where the bands played and enthusiastically learning the latest dances.

Unfortunately for us, Spohr lived before the era of sound recording so we are unable to hear how its composer would have interpreted his *Historical Symphony*. In the case of Coates, however, it is an entirely different story. He began his recording career in March 1923 when the acoustic process was still in use with the performers ranged before an enormous horn down which their sounds passed onto the cutting mechanism.

Two years later electrical recording technology took over with the use of microphones and from then on Coates made regular appearances in the studios to cut 78s of most of his compositions. Three years after composing his *Four Centuries Suite*, Coates recorded it in 1944 with the National Symphony Orchestra on Decca 78s AK1273-1274, though, because of the time limitations of a 78 side, cuts had to be made in the music.

But then the LP arrived with its much longer playing time and Coates made a new recording of the work with the New Symphony Orchestra of London in February 1953 on Decca LK4056, so today we are able to hear the composer's own take on his music in first-class sound.

Both of these recordings of the suite are included in a seven-CD Nimbus set (NI6231) of all the commercial recordings Coates made from 1923 to 1957. If only we could have said the same for Spohr, alas! However, it would make a fascinating concert if the Spohr and Coates works could both be included together. The *Four Centuries Suite* could start the programme while the *Historical Symphony* rounded things off. In between could come some of the other orchestral works influenced by styles of the past.