
THE CASE FOR SPOHR

by Keith Warsop

One hundred and fifty years ago the name of Louis Spohr would have needed no introduction to music lovers. In 1823 his opera "Jessonda" and in 1826 his oratorio "Die letzten Dinge" (known in England as 'The Last Judgement') had been performed to universal applause, while, following the deaths of Weber in 1826 and Beethoven in 1827, his position as the leading German composer went unchallenged until the rise of Mendelssohn and the posthumous development of Schubert's reputation. (see note I.)

But although Spohr was considered one of the acknowledged 'great composers', towards the end of the 19th century his standing started to decline. Later still it suffered further devaluation as a part of that general revolt against the Victorian age which took place during the early 20th century.

Now however there are signs that Spohr is making a comeback. Our own time is not content to accept history-book judgements and has been busy taking a new look at the music of the past, resurrecting composers who have been buried away on dusty library shelves for generations. In this spate of activity Spohr is already earning a number of performances, recordings and new publications (2). Perhaps the bicentenary of his birth in 1984 will give fresh impetus to this trend.

What exactly were the reasons for Spohr's fall from supreme eminence to become just another 'interesting historical figure' in the history books? The standard reference works offer several explanations:

1. He was too prolific in his output and lacked serious self-criticism.
2. His over-indulgence in sentimental chromaticism produced effete, sickly music, lacking the vigorous muscle of Beethoven.
3. He stuck too closely to text-book formulae . . . the notion that Spohr rhymes with 'bore' dies hard (3).

When we come to the facts we find that they do not square up completely with those notions. For instance Spohr was not over-prolific in comparison with his contemporaries. Beethoven lived to the age of 57, by which time his opus numbers had reached 135; Spohr died at 75 with 156 opus numbers. Cynics may point to Spohr's 36 string quartets and 18 violin concertos, but I could equally draw attention to Beethoven's 32 Piano Sonatas compared with Spohr's single contribution to the form. Like Beethoven Spohr composed nine symphonies; but so did Schubert (who died aged 31), Bruckner (72), Dvorak (63), Mahler (51), and Vaughan Williams (85). Clearly Spohr's output is not especially large.

As for Spohr's alleged lack of self-criticism, this is legend easily disproved. There are many works which Spohr either published with reluctance -- as a favour to a publisher -- or else revised before publication. In addition there are a number he withdrew completely, and among these still in existence are an oratorio, two violin concertos, three double concertos, two string quartets, and a tenth symphony; as well as many shorter compositions, (4). Many passages in his Autobiography tell of his dissatisfaction with some of his works and of his efforts at improvement, (5).

Spohr's partiality for chromaticism is a more serious charge. But this in itself is no sin. Certainly there are some works which suffer from it, but many others are enhanced by the romantic, dreamy quality of the music, providing moments of great beauty --- and sometimes wit --- which I for one would not readily give up.

The idea, circulated widely in Tovey's otherwise sympathetic writings, that Spohr's formal range extended only to what was to be found in the standard text-books is quite absurdly mistaken as a close examination of many works would show, (6). Once again some of his compositions do seem to just go through the motions but many others show an imaginative approach to formal problems; and there are others in which the formal procedures, although more conventional, seem right in their context, (7).

It is perhaps significant that the works which contain too much chromatic sentiment to be palatable today and those which show a pedantic approach to sonata and allied forms are generally from a period of Spohr's life which, I believe, contributed forcefully to the decline of his reputation.

I can best explain this 'fallow patch' in Spohr's career by comparing it with that of Richard Strauss which it often parallels. Both Spohr and Strauss sprang to early fame, were soon accepted as leading composers of their day and pressed on towards the new paths that music was taking. Then followed a period in middle life when each composer appeared to have settled into routine; their vital creative spark seemed to disappear from their compositions and the more modern trends left them behind. Finally, and here again Spohr mirrors Strauss, in old age there came a rekindling of the original fire; a series of late works to which Strauss authorities apply the term 'autumnal'.

Spohr is often linked with Mendelssohn as typically 'Victorian' in sentiment, but his peak as a leader of German music was reached in the 1820s and the production of 'Jessonda', mentioned at the start of this article, was probably the highlight. By the 1830s the sentiment of the 'Biedermeier' epoch was beginning to show in his music. The death of his first wife, Dorette, in 1834 took away his severest critic and his remarriage two years later did nothing to halt the trend as his second wife, Marianne, worshipped Spohr as a 'Meister' and would never venture to criticise anything he composed.

It is during this period that we notice the first serious public criticism of Spohr's music. Most of the commentators still accept the familiarity of his style while still conceding the 'loftiness' of his ideas. Many of Spohr's earlier compositions -- the ones with which he first gained his reputation -- were written for himself to perform during his tours as a violin virtuoso, or were composed for other soloists such as the clarinettist, Hermstedt, or his own wife, Dorette, who was a harp virtuoso.

But after his appointment as General Music Director at Kassel in 1822, Spohr's conducting began to dominate at the expense of his soloist work. The unfortunate result was that as Spohr did not perform the earlier works so frequently - apart from a handful which had already taken a hold in the repertoire - and stayed there until this century - it was from his later compositions that judgements began to be formed. During the 1820s his works remained of high quality, but from about 1833 to 1846 came the more routine works and these as a whole did not have the staying power to maintain a hold on concert programmes once their initial success abated.

So just at the time audiences were beginning to question Spohr's musical stature, their rejection was accelerated by the lower-powered inspiration of those later works.

Despite this trend the outstanding earlier works like the Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Violin Concertos and the Nonet had little trouble keeping their place in concert programmes until the 1920s. Then the proscribing of Spohr's music by the Nazis hammered the final nail into the coffin of his reputation, (8).

From about 1847 Spohr began his final period of compositions which I have compared with that of Strauss. During the following eight years, until his powers of composition failed, came a series of high quality works: the Fourth Double-quartet; a String Sextet, the Fifth Piano Trio, the Septet; the last three Violin Duos and a set of songs for baritone, violin and piano. In these works Spohr achieves at times an almost Brahmsian mellowness. Yet, as his friend and pupil Hauptmann wrote: "For Spohr, the early time was the best" (9); and so in these works we also find the aging composer in a retrospective mood. The horn calls in the second trio of the Septet's scherzo may take us to the brink of the Brahms-Mahler sound world but the skittish second subject of the same work's finale glances right back over 40 years to the mood of the Nonet. None of these works, however, were for orchestra, so they had little effect on the future of Spohr's reputation, although the violin duos soon came to be recognised as the supreme masterpieces of this form, (see note 10).

But if there is to be a place for Spohr in today's sun, it is on the work up to and including the 1820s that the case must be argued. Certainly many of the violin concertos are overdue for revival by our present-day virtuosi; from No.2 in D minor whose performance in Leipzig in 1804 catapulted the 20 year old Spohr to overnight fame and moved the critic Rochlitz to write: "We know of no violin concerto which can take precedence of that in D minor, whether as regards conception, soul, and charm, or also in respect to precision and firmness", (11). . . through to No.II of 1825, for all deserve revival and revaluation. The famous No.8 - the 'Gesangszene' - is not alone in having attractive qualities. The symphonic breadth of No.5, the rhapsodic and dramatic mood of No.6, the classical mastery and inspiration of No.7 which is probably the finest of Spohr's concertos, the virtuosity of the grandiose No.9 and the lyricism of No.II; all these works have as much demand to be heard as the No.8.

Matching these concertos in stature and containing a captivating finale described by Spohr as 'saucily playful' is the early Concertante No.I for two violins and orchestra. As for the clarinet concertos modern players have already discovered their qualities and it is good news that more recordings of them are likely to be with us soon.

During Spohr's early touring period he also composed works for the harp, both solo and in partnership with the violin. These fine works are already achieving revival and are doing their part to enhance Spohr's standing today. The years 1812 to 1815 were spent in Vienna where Spohr's style gained added depth. In addition he also absorbed the lighter side of the Viennese style, most notably in the Nonet and Octet and also in the Notturmo for wind band and percussion which has all the attractive features of its better-known cousins as shewn on the recording by Leslie Jones (Oryx 1830), an issue jointly sponsored by this conductor and the Spohr Society.

Spohr's music acquires a note of higher drama during the 1820s -- perhaps because of his increasing interest in opera -- and from this period dates a whole series of masterpieces; the fourth clarinet concerto, the B minor string quintet, opus 69; the D minor string quartet, opus 74/3; and the opera 'Jessonda'. The excellent Double-quartet No.I in D minor has appeared on records, but No.2 in E flat is an even finer work and

and one which Spohr himself thought more successful than the No.1. Finally, from this decade I must mention the oratorio completed in 1826, 'Die letzten Dinge'. Known in England as 'The Last Judgement', it is a work that became one of the greatest successes of Spohr's career and one of the most popular works throughout the 19th century. Today, vilified and unjustly condemned as an example of Victorian religiosity, it is in desperate need of dusting down and being listened to with fresh ears. When it was written, Victoria was only five years old and eleven years away from becoming queen. Such was the oratorio's success that Spohr's style in it was copied by a host of inferior imitators whose sentimental excesses went far beyond anything imagined by Spohr. The resulting image which they established for Victorian oratorio also rubbed off onto the Spohr work, but it says much for its staying power that it was still being performed early in this century when most of the imitations had long been forgotten.

From the later decades of Spohr's life there is only a handful of his compositions I would recommend - at least until they can be performed with the sort of understanding we now give to Strauss' middle-period works. In the symphony Spohr was a late starter; his first dates from 1811, the second from 1820 and the third from 1827. The second and third will stand up well in performance today, but it is with No.4 (1832) that Spohr scored his biggest symphonic success. Subtitled 'Die Weihe der Töne' it was an early entrant into the field of programme composition. But unlike the 'Symphonie Fantastique' of Berlioz, written the year before, Spohr ignored programmatic psychology in favour of philosophy and thus inaugurated a tradition which had such distinguished followers as Alkan, Liszt, Raff and Richard Strauss. The inspiration came from a poem which describes the power of sound; sounds of life and nature, the lullaby, the dance, the serenade, sounds of war, victory and thanksgiving, the sounds of death and sadness. Although 'Die Weihe der Töne' does have weaknesses, its many virtues make a modern recording and performance an essential in the near future.

Immediately after completing the symphony Spohr wrote his double-quartet No.3, a charming but lightweight piece which has remained the most popular of his four double-quartets. Then he began the composition of his oratorio 'Des Heilands letzte Stunden' (known as 'Calvary' in England) and one of Spohr's best works. Shortly before its completion Dorette died, and I have already suggested that Spohr's creative impulse weakened after this time, yet strangely enough one of the most dramatic and unified works comes from the heart of this period; the symphony No.5 in C minor, dating from 1837.

Admittedly the strong, concentrated style of this symphony has caused at least one critic to label it 'monotonous', but, in fact, it has a swarthy unity of mood and deep feeling which is far removed from Spohr's usual lyrical poetry. Perhaps only at this time, remarried, settled again, and recollecting in tranquillity, was Spohr able to write music capable of the intensity of his sad days of 1834 as he laboured to finish 'Calvary' by the dying Dorette's bedside. Whatever the subconscious cause, the fifth symphony stands solitary in Spohr's output with an almost Brucknerian grandeur that becomes most noticeable in the great Adagio where the supremely Romantic sound of gently resigned horn calls fade away in the coda.

If this symphony and some of the other works I have drawn attention to can be brought to life again, there will be little need to plead 'the case for Spohr', and no fear as to what will be the Last Judgement on his music.

NOTES:(1)--'Jessonda' was first performed at Kassel on July 28th 1823, and 'Die letzten Dinge' on March 25th 1826 also in Kassel, with Spohr conducting on both occasions.

(2)--New Selected Edition from the German Louis-Spohr-Gesellschaft; series of wind works from Musica Rara; also works in the Bärenreiter Verlag series "The 19th century".

(3)--Grove's Dictionary, Cobbett's Cyclopaedia of Chamber Music, and the old Oxford History of Music are among many who make these points.

(4)--Spohr comments on his Opus 4 string quartets: "With them I succeeded no better than with song composition. Shortly after their completion they no longer pleased me and for that reason I should not have published them, had not my Leipzig publisher Herr Kuhnel . . . retained them almost by force and shortly published them as opus 4."

(5)--There are so many instances quoted by Spohr in his Autobiography that it is impossible to list them here.

(6)--Among others, Violin Concertos No.3, No.5, No.8, No.II; Clarinet Concerto No.I; Symphony No.5; Octet and various works with a programme.

(7)--The double-quartet No.2 is a fine example of Spohr's completely convincing use of a more conventional formal structure.

(8)--The Nazis did not ban ALL Spohr's music, but they banned 'Jessonda' which, of course, led to many performers avoiding his other works; they closed down the Louis Spohr Society because of its alleged Jewish connections.

(9)--Moritz Hauptmann (1792-1868) letter to his friend Franz Hauser, October 26th, 1859.

(10)--Tovey, in his Essays in Musical Analysis, and Cobbett, in his Cyclopaedia of Chamber Music, are particularly enthusiastic.

(11)--Friedrich Rochlitz (1769-1842) in the musical journal Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung, of which he was the editor. The concert took place on December 10th, 1804.