

SPOHR AND BEETHOVEN'S FIFTH SYMPHONY

by Chris Tutt

Nothing has been more damaging to Spohr's reputation than the criticisms of Beethoven's 5th and 9th Symphonies found in the Autobiography. It takes an effort of the imagination to understand why Spohr felt the way he did about these great works. He did not have the same reservations about the other Beethoven symphonies; in fact he expressed great admiration for the 7th, which in its own way is just as powerful and original as the 5th and 9th. What then were the distinctive features of the two symphonies that Spohr disliked?

Let us consider what he actually said about the 5th: "It has many individual beauties, but they do not add up to a classical whole. The very first theme, in particular, lacks the dignity essential to the opening of a symphony. This aside, however, the short, easily grasped theme lends itself well to thematic elaboration, and the composer has combined it most imaginatively and effectively with the other principal motives of the first movement. The adagio in A flat is very beautiful in part, but the same progressions and modulations are repeated too often, despite even richer figuration. The scherzo is highly original and of genuinely romantic texture, but the trio with its tumbling bass runs is too baroque for my taste. The last movement, with its empty noise, is the least satisfactory, although the return of the scherzo is such a happy idea that one can only envy the composer who could have thought of such a thing. It is quite irresistible. What a pity that the effect is so soon dissipated by the resumption of the noise!" In his words about the 9th Symphony it is again the finale that he found most difficult to accept. Both finales are triumphant answers in the major key to the powerful, sombre tones of the minor key first movements. It is the emotional effect of this strong contrast which makes such an impact on audiences. This sort of relationship between a first movement and a finale was a novel inspiration on Beethoven's part, not found in earlier symphonies, though repeated many times afterwards in such works as Brahms's 1st Symphony, Tchaikowsky's 4th and 5th, and Mahler's 2nd.

Spohr evidently felt uneasy about the emotional impact of such movements and considered that these did not conform to his ideal structure of a classical symphony. In fact Haydn and Mozart with the stature of their last symphonies had left a considerable problem of formal balance to their successors. What was to be the most suitable type of finale for a symphony with more powerful expression in its earlier movements? The traditional light-hearted finale of the 18th Century would no longer suffice. Mozart provided superb examples of finales of greater emotional weight in his last two symphonies. Beethoven's nine symphonies are very distinctive in character and each has an individual answer to this problem. It is worth noting, however, that for both the 5th and 9th Beethoven at first considered using quick passionate movements in the minor key. The rejected finale of the 9th was later reworked as the finale of the A minor quartet. The finale of the big symphony was for Schubert too a problem, which he solved brilliantly in the 'Great' C major, but may have caused him to abandon work on the 7th and 8th symphonies.

The same problem arose for Spohr as well. In his first symphony, and to some extent in the second and third, the finale is too lightweight in relation to the rest of the work. The slower closes of the 4th and 7th symphonies are considerably more effective. Spohr's ideal of the

classical symphony came closest to fruition in No.5 in C minor. As this has the same tonic as Beethoven's great work, it may be of interest to compare the works of the two composers.

Beethoven opens with the challenging first four bars of the allegro, the idea which dominates the symphony and makes such an impact on audiences. Its rhythm and mood sweep the listener onwards in its grim C minor until the horn brings an abrupt change of key and mood to the second subject in E flat. Spohr begins with a slow introduction, Andante in C major, with a long theme that rises over a pedal point. All seems serene at first, but gradually it becomes more animated and then the full orchestra bursts in with a powerful allegro theme in C minor. This is extended with considerable impetus, if not quite the energy of Beethoven, but this subsides into several bars of quiet chromatic harmony which form the transition to the second subject in E flat. In both cases gentle second subjects are soon swept aside by motives from the first section and the expositions end on a strong note, though Spohr is less direct, wandering in harmony and key. Beethoven gives great weight to the development and the coda, whereas Spohr's form keeps nearer to 18th Century proportions. The most notable feature of Spohr's development is the appearance of a modified version of the theme of the slow introduction, first as an oboe solo and later played by the first violins. These are beautiful episodes, but the thematic working out in the central part is rather staid when compared with Beethoven. In both symphonies the recapitulation is regular with only minor modifications, such as the moving oboe cadenza in the Beethoven. In the coda Spohr leaves the tonality rather vague until the final bars and the mood is restless and uncertain. Beethoven's keeps much more to the home key of C minor and the grim mood of the first subject sweeps all before it.

Both slow movements have a basic key of A flat, but they have different functions in their respective works. Beethoven's offers some relaxation after the relentless drive of the first movement and, though it has passages of solemn beauty, grandeur and mystery, it has less emotional weight than the other movements. Spohr, on the other hand, makes the slow movement the heart of the symphony as we find in Bruckner's works. The use of trombones in this movement and the rich harmony help to sustain the elevated mood established in the first few bars.

Beethoven returns to the grim mood of his first movement in his highly original scherzo in C minor and this is not dispelled by the fugato trio with its lumbering entries of the basses and cellos, which so displeased Spohr. The mysterious atmosphere of the return of the scherzo with its radically altered orchestration and the link passage to the finale are daring strokes of genius. Spohr's own scherzo in C major is the most cheerful part of his work and was very warmly received when the symphony was first performed in Vienna in 1837. The trio is a gentle interlude with delicate interweaving of the wind instruments.

The finales are of course very different movements, but one thing they have in common is the use of thematic references to earlier material. Echoes of the famous opening are found in accompaniment figures in Beethoven's triumphant finale and there is the episode based on scherzo material. Spohr uses the theme of the first movement's slow introduction as the finale's second subject and this returns in the coda, only to be engulfed by other material. Beethoven's finale is thought to portray an overwhelming victory after a grim struggle earlier. The strong emphasis on the tonic C major in long passages for full orchestra and the scoring with the addition of the trombones and contrabassoon contribute to its effect. Spohr's finale, a Presto in C minor, brings a return of conflict after the calm of the slow movement and the cheerfulness of the scherzo. Its quick fugato first subject has a

restless energy which persists to the end of the movement. It has much greater momentum than is usual in Spohr's later music, though it does not reach Beethoven's intensity of expression. The coda is comparatively short and, though C major is reached in the very last bars, the mood of restlessness is not really resolved. The ambiguity of this conclusion may leave the listener rather dissatisfied, but this was evidently how Spohr felt about life and his work. Many of his later works end in such a way, but the codas of his operatic overtures show that he could bring a work to a triumphant conclusion, when he thought it appropriate.

What then are we to think of Spohr's words criticising Beethoven's 5th and 9th symphonies? These have often been quoted with derision, with the suggestion that Spohr was a narrow-minded, pompous fool, who did not know what he was talking about. Certainly they were not instant opinions published immediately after a first performance. In fact they appear in the Autobiography which was not published until after his death and they come from notes in his diary. Spohr had formed these opinions in the course of hearing and conducting the symphonies many times. Let us not forget that many other musicians and critics of the early 19th Century had reservations about Beethoven's music. The strength and even roughness of some of his music could disturb and offend those who shared Spohr's ideals of formal balance and emotional restraint in music. Today the Beethoven symphonies are acknowledged masterpieces, but there may still be some music lovers who do not always respond to them, yet would not readily admit this. We can all be the passive receivers of accepted opinions and not admit our genuine responses to music. These vary so much from person to person. Spohr's own music has a very individual quality and can arouse many different responses. Some people would find nothing at all in it to interest them; others could respond warmly to it and find more real enjoyment from it than from many works that are now in the standard repertoire. Let us remember that at the height of his fame he inspired not just respect and admiration, but also deep affection from his public. He was a composer, not a critic, and many creative artists because of the strength of their own views have been unable to appreciate fully the achievements of their colleagues. What matters is not what he said about other composers, but what he himself achieved.