

THE SPOHR ENTRY IN THE NEW GROVE

by Christopher Tutt

Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, which first appeared between 1878 and 1889 and reached a Fifth Edition with many modifications and additions in 1954, was a great landmark in the development of musicology in this country. It has now been replaced by The New Grove, which is on a much larger scale and has a complete fresh set of entries. This is now available in all the major libraries, but for the benefit of members who do not have ready access to it I would like to make some comments about the entry for Spohr. I do not claim detailed expert knowledge and I hope that some of the musicians among us will be prepared to treat this subject in greater depth at a later date.

There was a full article about Spohr covering several pages in the First Edition of Grove, but by the Fifth Edition the same article was still there heavily cut. Most of what was left was a potted biography culled largely from the Autobiography. Only two paragraphs were left under the subheading 'Qualities of the Musician' and these had scarcely any reference to particular works. It repeats the fashionable opinion held about Spohr towards the end of the 19th Century, summing it up in these words:-

But there is considerable sameness - nay, monotony - in his works. Be it oratorio or concerto, opera or string quartet, he treats them all in much the same manner, and it is not so much the distinctive styles peculiar to these several forms of music that we find as Spohr's peculiar individuality impressed upon all of them. He was certainly not devoid of originality, but certain melodious phrases and cadences, chromatic progressions and enharmonic modulations, in themselves beautiful enough and most effective, occur over and over again, until they appear to partake more of the nature of mechanical contrivances than to be the natural emanations of a living musical organism.'

There is, of course, some justification for this judgement, but we should be the first to declare that this is by no means the whole truth. What is very much lacking here are examples of works or passages from works to illustrate the characteristics mentioned, and in particular descriptions of those works where Spohr is at his best and rises far above any weaknesses in his style. The original article in the First Edition did praise several works including 'Jessonda' and Violin Concertos nos.7, 8 and 9. The Bibliography in the Fifth Edition only consists of the Autobiography, 'Spohr and the Baton' by Arthur Jacobs and 'L.Spohr als Opernkomponist' by R.Wassermann. The Catalogue of Works does not include the unpublished works such as the 3rd and 4th Clarinet Concertos, the early Violin Concertos in E minor and A major or the Concertantes for Violin and Harp.

In The New Grove there is a fresh article by Martin Weyer, who goes into considerable detail and devotes about half the space to a survey Spohr's works. There is an extensive Bibliography and the Catalogue of Works includes a number of unpublished items such as Symphony no.10 and the unfinished Requiem. A surprising omission is the early Violin Concerto in A major, which has been published in modern times by Bärenreiter.

In the general introduction to the section on works due acknowledgement is made to the influence of Cherubini and French composers such as Mehul and Rode on Spohr's style. Reference is made to several of the violin concertos and their current neglect compared to the clarinet concertos is mentioned, but not explained. About the symphonies Martin Weyer says:-

' - His ten symphonies can be divided into two groups, the first of which (comprising nos.1,2,3,5, & 6) derives in style directly from the Classical period, including Beethoven. In this group, of which no.3 is the most successful, Spohr avoided using contrasting ideas in Beethovenian manner, without giving up a certain measure of grandeur; his melodious themes lend themselves more to an epic method of treatment. - - The later group of symphonies is characterized for the most part by attempts to vary the traditional form with programmatic elements. Although there are formal and instrumental innovations, fundamentally the music lacks substance and is often eclectic. Though the Symphony no.4 found general

favour, no.6 met particularly hostile criticism for its misplaced satire of modern music. Moreover, these works are not really interesting in the history of programme music, since they do not progress beyond a primitive stage of programmatic association. -'

There are several points here worth commenting on. There is possibly a misprint in the reference to no.6 as one of the symphonies deriving in style from the Classical period, though the 'Historic Symphony' is nearer to the Classical style than the other programmatic symphonies. No.8 is probably meant and the unpublished no.10 also follows the classical form. We might not all agree that no.3 is the most successful of the group and could put up arguments in favour of either no.2 or no.5. I query the statement 'the music lacks substance' in relation to no.4 and no.7 and would like to have seen some discussion of the particular merits and defects of these works.

In the section on chamber music Martin Weyer explains clearly the circumstances which led Spohr to give such prominence to the first violin part in most of these works. He does not, however, bring out the fuller part writing in some of the string quartets such as op.45 no.2. There is a definite need for a detailed study of the quartets, bringing out the musical merits of individual works and the standards they require of performers. Among the string quintets opp.69, 91 and 106 are singled out for praise and it is said that the remaining quintets resemble the 'quatuors brillants'. What about the string quintet in G, op.33 no.2, composed in Vienna at about the same time as the Nonet and the Octet, which was favourably received at the time? The Nonet Octet and the Double Quartets are mentioned, but there is no reference to any of the later works that include a piano.

The sections about choral music and Lieder are fairly brief and do not discuss individual works, but there is a considerable space devoted to the operas, particularly 'Faust' and 'Jessonda' and some discussion of the lack of success Spohr had with his later operas. There are references to the influence which Spohr's operas had on Wagner, but I also think that something of Spohr's influence did reach French and Italian opera by way of Meyerbeer, who was a warm admirer of Spohr.

There is a concluding section which tries to explain the social forces and musical trends which led to Spohr's great success during his lifetime and to the neglect his music received later. The unsatisfactory entry in the Fifth Edition of Grove is a measure of that neglect and the better treatment that Spohr gets in The New Grove does show the signs of a more balanced approach. However the amount of space and detail given to him is but a tiny proportion of what each of the accepted major composers gets; even Weber gets far more consideration. This is of course a reflection of the present state of public and scholarly interest in their work. As far as the general public is concerned, and even a number of musical scholars, there is widespread ignorance of the range and quality of Spohr's work. There is a great need for more performances, recordings and publications. At least the article in The New Grove does shed some light and may encourage other scholars and performers to go further.
