

SPOHR'S PIANO MUSIC

by David Branson

Spoehr wrote little for the piano alone: only the Sonata in A flat, Op.125, the Rondoletto, Op.149, and duet and solo version of his "Memories of Marienbad" Waltz, Op.89, the duet of course the fuller.

It is typical of him that when he decided to compose a solo piano work, it was the Sonata (1845). He married a pianist, Marianne Pfeiffer, in 1836, and doubtless it was written for her to play. Its general manner is harmonious and amiable, with its first movement making the most impact, while there is nothing specifically new, as with Field, or extending-of-the-range by way of harmonic exploration or greater complexity as with Chopin and Liszt --- Spohr using then well-accepted coinage --- it is all the same very well crafted. Beethoven directed Spohr to the importance of structure, and, conscious of wider form, he also uses smaller patterns to jigsaw effect, employing variations of each which leave the aspect of ingenuity never absent (while making the task of memory none too simple for the performer). The opening Allegro moderato and the Romanze are the most tightly woven, the first movement having the greater variety. The Brahms E flat minor Scherzo would appear to owe something to the main subject of the Sonata's Scherzo, for the Trio of which Spohr converts the theme of the Romanze's middle section. For the Finale (Allegretto) he would seem to have absorbed something of Field's chirpy Rondo manner.

That Beethoven has more punch (and for that matter an original like Field) gives some reason for the neglect of Spohr's Sonata. Nevertheless, it is well worth performance from time to time and is, too, an indication of what the composer could achieve in a medium not natural to him.

The Rondoletto of 1848 has a certain gracefulness in the jaunty theme, but far too many embarrassingly trite phrases --- one has, for example, to brace oneself to play bars 7-16. Spohr could possibly have aimed at a 'Victorian' drawing-room piece and in contrast to its (few) better moments have caught some of the less fortunate elements in the style. Other and earlier composers in similar light-hearted mood have done this better and, so late, the Rondoletto is markedly out of touch with Romantic music as then developed. A trifle, it has to be said, not worthy of the composer's other work; the Sonata has much more to it.

The earlier "Marienbad" Waltz (1834), really three waltzes in the form ABACA, and originally for orchestra, again points Spohr's romanticism in the direction of Brahms, with its very clear anticipation of the latter's methods in composing in the genre. Spohr set out to write a light waltz in the manner of the Straussses but, with his material superior and tailoring more resourceful, succeeded in producing an article with both charm and more intrinsic quality. It provides most attractive listening and should certainly be in the duet repertoire.