THE SHADOW OF BEETHOVEN

The Problem of the Scherzo in Spohr's Third Symphony

By Keith Warsop

The Scherzo of Spohr's Symphony No.3 in C minor, Op.78 has always been a problematic movement. The preface to the Bürenreiter miniature score edited by Horst Heussen (TP27, published 1957) says: "The third movement, an Allegro split up into many individual sections, is less significant and convincing [than the other movements]. Its lack of inner tension makes it appear monotonous in performance, and the Trio, with its chromatic effects, is also without an effective climax." (English text Page XII).

For the recording of the symphony performed by the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Gerd Albrecht and issued on Schwann long playing record VMS1626 in 1984 (later on CD 11620), the sleeve note by Ekkehart Kroher, translated by Celia Skrine, is also critical: "The same [the best thing of its kind that he had ever written] could not be said of the C minor Scherzo which follows, even if one does not take Beethoven's scherzi as a yardstick and disregards Schumann's dictum that 'scherzos are not Spohr's strong point.' The Scherzo does unmistakably speak with Spohr's own voice, however, and avoids quirkiness in favour of sincerity. This is perhaps why the Trio is not sufficiently contrasted with the Scherzo itself, despite its chromatic harmonies and lively instrumentation."

In reviewing this recording in the magazine Gramophone (Volume 62, Number 738, Page 612, November 1984) John Warrack stated: "If the scherzo is less distinctive, that is perhaps because Spohr could not really find a way out of Beethoven's shadow at this point; with due respect for Spohr's memory, I would venture to suggest that this is really a three-movement symphony with a superfluous scherzo."

Lest it be thought that the conductor Gerd Albrecht is being singled out here for criticism, it must be said that other modern commercial recordings of the symphony also fail to interpret the scherzo convincingly (RBM Musikproduktion LP RBM3035: Southwest German Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Tamás Sulyok; Amati CD SRR8904/1: Southwest German Radio Symphony Orchestra Baden Baden conducted by Leopold Hager).

In addition, Clive Brown (Louis Spohr: A Critical Biography, Cambridge UP 1984, Page 137), in an otherwise detailed analysis of the symphony, rather skates over the scherzo in non-committal fashion, saying merely: "The Scherzo (C minor 6/4) is more restless than playful and never quite attains a climax. In the Trio (C major) the wind instruments cavort capriciously with charming effect."

Our own feeling is that the trouble lies not in the scherzo itself but in the attempt by conductors to make the movement resemble the standard scherzo model of classical tradition with its clearly defined points of climax.

Spohr's first two symphonies (1811 and 1820) were isolated events in the first half of his composing career, both being the result of commissions. It was not until December 1827 that Spohr began work on the Third Symphony at the close of the year in which Beethoven had died. It is a commonplace of music criticism that the symphonies of Beethoven cast a large shadow over his successors and that, in contrast to the 18th century composer who could turn out sets of symphonies by the yard, the 19th century composer was all the time aware that, after Beethoven, the symphony was judged by the most exacting of standards.

Is it fanciful to consider Spohr as probably the first composer of repute to feel this pressure? After the wide intervals between his earlier symphonies, it is interesting to speculate on his return to the form so soon after Beethoven's death. Whether that event lifted a psychological barrier or whether Spohr felt that it was now up to him to carry the symphonic torch for German music cannot, of course, be confirmed. Perhaps the correct interpretation is a combination of both.

There is also the possibility that Spohr was deliberately invoking "the shadow of Beethoven." The Scherzo opens with a reminiscence of the scherzo from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony — perhaps meant as a tribute from Spohr to the memory of the friend of his Vienna period, for we know how much he admired this movement. When Spohr's comments on the Fifth Symphony are extracted from his Autobiography, only the criticisms are usually given so it is easy to forget what he wrote in praise of this movement: "The Scherzo is highly original and of real romantic colouring... The return of the Scherzo at this point [of the finale] is so happy an idea that the composer may be envied for it, its effect is most captivating."

Overall, to us, Spohr's Scherzo seems like a musical equivalent to a "fantasie-stück" by a German Romantic writer such as E. T. A. Hoffmann or Jean Paul (Spohr was friendly with both men). There are no clear-cut climaxes; instead half-lights and subdued dynamics hold sway (only the final bar is played fortissimo). Perhaps a conductor would do well to bear in mind the instruction "Schattenhaft" which Mahler gave to some of his spectral scherzos. Furthermore, the world of Hoffmann and Jean Paul is close to that of German Romantic opera in the 1820s (indeed, Hoffmann's own earlier opera, Undine, was a key work in the development of this genre). Spohr's own operas at this stage of his career are full of supernatural happenings. Der Berggeist, Pietro von Abano and Der Alchemist all contain music which could be paralleled in the Scherzo. We are not suggesting that Spohr had an actual supernatural story in mind for this Scherzo; merely that an intention to get away from the conventional type led him to write the sort of music which would not have been out of place in a "Zauber-oper". With this interpretation, the wind-dominated Trio would blow away the trolls or
goblins and show the happier side of German folklore, the "happy, smiling youth setting out through the forest" type of story (We could also point out that about the same time, the young Mendelssohn was writing his "fairy" scherzos, which also often lack real climaxes although their absence has never been criticised).

We had formulated all of the above before it occurred suddenly to us that there is a famous description of a performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in E. M. Forster's novel Howard's End in which one character exactly imagines goblins entering the music: "Look out for the part where you think you have done with the goblins and they come back," breathed Helen." And Spohr said of just this moment: "The return of the Scherzo at this part is so happy an idea that the composer may be envied for it." Beethoven's Scherzo and goblins; Spohr's Scherzo and goblins; Spohr's Scherzo and E. T. A. Hoffmann; the links may be closer than we suppose. Now the challenge is for a conductor to make this movement come to life for us and prove that Spohr after all had got it right.

TOURING WITH SPOHR

By Malcolm Latchem

(of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble)

I first became aware of the Spohr Society of Great Britain in early 1983 when I spotted the composer's name on a screwed up piece of paper discarded in the Academy of St Martin in the Fields office wastepaper basket. I promptly salvaged the leaflet which was a well-timed circular sent out by the Society to remind musical organisations of the pending bicentenary of Spohr.

This was the beginning of a happy relationship with the Society. We received great encouragement and invaluable financial help from the Society's Record Fund in order to record all four Double Quartets with Hyperion. Fortunately, the wastepaper basket serendipity gave me time to include Spohr's Second Double Quartet in E flat major, Op.77 in our concert in New York's Carnegie Hall on the exact date of the bicentenary, April 5, 1984. We were also able to celebrate at the Queen Elizabeth Hall by dedicating our three concerts of the season to Spohr and, of course, including his works.

Unlike string quartets, who can draw upon a repertoire of more than 500 well-known and loved "masterpieces", the Chamber Ensemble has discovered some 16 string octets only and an equal number of sextets. We have commissioned two new octets, by Richard Rodney Bennett and John Woolrich, which makes a total of 18 octets.

It is easy to understand that during the first 12 years of the Ensemble the only works performed were Mendelssohn's Octet, the two Brahms' sextets and Schubert's two-cello Quintet. Concert Societies were happy to provide audiences with music they already knew and loved.

When I took over the task of managing the Chamber Ensemble in 1979 I was able to pursue the important aspect of enlarging our repertoire. By the way, I am the second violinist of the ensemble and it is interesting to note how often "management" of chamber groups, quartets etc., is taken on by an inner part player - very often the violinist.

I had discovered Spohr's First Double Quartet in D minor, Op.65 in Dartington College of Arts Library and had read this through with the students. An ideal work for students as the first double quartet in Op.65 is that little bit easier. By 1981 we were performing Op.65 in Germany, Switzerland, the United States and Norway. I had also tracked down the other three double quartets - not an easy job as none were in print. So Spohr was no stranger to us when I spotted his name in the wastepaper basket!

The perpetual problem for concert societies is to programme music or composers which are not known to the general public. Time after time we had offered Spohr, only to be requested for something "better known." Mendelssohn's Octet, written when he was only 16 is, of course, a "masterpiece"; and maybe names like Svendsen, Raff, Milhaud, Gade and Enesco do not immediately fill the ensembles' sponsors with delight. But we have persevered and audiences have responded with appreciation to the charm or warmth of the new (for them) music. Enesco's Octet in C, Op.7 (written when he was only 19) was hailed by three independent critics as a masterpiece when we performed it in the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

Some years ago, the Ensemble was asked to give four concerts in the Castle Hotel, Taunton, at a weekend of music and food. The final scheme was to increase the size of the Ensemble gradually (thus saving money!). Programme 1: Quintets; Programmes 2 and 3: Sextets; Programme 4: Octets - Spohr Double Quartet in E flat, Op.77, Raff Octet Op.178, Mendelssohn Octet, Op.20.

The room where we performed was very small, holding 40 armchairs and sofas for the well-fed audience, sitting close enough to have to dodge the occasional enthusiastic bow stroke.

In this atmosphere, the Spohr was a smash hit. When we returned to the West Country the following year to give six concerts - all the societies had requested Spohr! Some of the organisers had been at Taunton and word had got around.

The "concert halls" proved to be either small churches or school gymnasiums or disused cinemas, small intimate halls, and the real chamber music aspect of Spohr's music was appreciated by all. Minchew in North Devon asked us back again two years later as long as we would play more Spohr. We played Op.65, Svendsen Octet in A, Op.3 and Martinu Sextet. All unknown? The hall was packed and the audience delighted with the "new" music!