

SPOHR'S MUSIC FOR THE CLARINET

by Maurice F. Powell

We continue our policy of reprinting revised versions of important articles which first appeared in our early Spohr Journals. This essay, by one of the founders of the Spohr Society of Great Britain, was included in Journal No.3.

THE history of the clarinet and its music is marked by significant collaborations between great composers and eminent executants: Mozart and Stadler, Weber and Baermann, Brahms and Mühlfeld; and so it is with Spohr whose special affection for the instrument and immediate grasp of its potentialities was largely due to his meeting the virtuoso Hermstedt.

Johann Simon Hermstedt's career was nothing short of a brilliant success. He was born in 1778, the son of an army musician, and received his education in a school for the sons of soldiers. From 1794 until 1799 he played the clarinet (and probably the violin as well, for he was also an accomplished violinist) in municipal bands, finally enlisting as a 'regimentsmusiker', becoming principal clarinetist in his father's regiment. It was during this period that he acquired the basis of his phenomenal technique.

In 1802 he was engaged by Prinz Günther Friedrich Karl von Schwarzburg-Sondershausen to form a 'Harmoniekorps' – a wind band which quickly achieved a high standard of virtuosity through Hermstedt's skilful and superior arrangements for it. Part of the band's duties consisted of providing musical entertainment at the court's summer Sunday concerts in the wooded Schlosspark. In 1815 Spohr wrote an original composition for the band, the Notturmo in C major, Op.34 with 'Janitscharenmusik' or Turkish instruments.

Hermstedt was promoted to the post of chamber musician to the Prince in 1809 and in 1810 to the position of musical director. He was further promoted in 1824 to Kapellmeister and in 1835, when the band was disbanded and the court orchestra founded, Hermstedt was made its musical director. He retired from his duties in 1839 and died in 1846.

Fruitful and industrious though his career as a musical director was, it was nevertheless overshadowed by his reputation and prowess as a virtuoso. His playing was dominated by technical skill acquired by pushing himself and his instrument to the extremes. In this respect he was distinguished from his contemporaries in the new era of clarinet virtuosity, foremost among whom were Franz Tausch and his pupil, Heinrich Baermann.

Tausch (1762-1817), brilliant technician, theorist and teacher, and founder of the Berlin Academy of Wind Instruments in 1805, made far greater demands than did Carl Stamitz or Mozart in their concertos. In some bravura passages he even exceeded the difficulties to be found in the clarinet works of either Weber or Spohr. Baermann, Weber's clarinetist, was a much respected musician, more refined in his execution than Hermstedt but more conservative. But Hermstedt of Sondershausen, the technical wizard, perhaps even a compulsive player (it is said that the throat disease from which he died may have been caused by excessive playing), was the most remarkable of the early virtuosos.

It must not be thought that Hermstedt was a mere showman. He was an intelligent man (as his letters show), possessed of musicianship and artistic integrity. Clearly, he was destined to enjoy a distinguished career as a performer. It is perhaps fortunate, however, that he was unable to compose music for himself to play, and that the Prince of Sondershausen, himself a keen clarinetist, suggested approaching Spohr who was able to write works tailor-made for his

individual technique, yet of lasting intrinsic musical value. Only towards the end of his career when he almost surpassed his own technical capabilities did Hermstedt's playing become occasionally mannered and lacking in taste¹.

It was during the winter of 1808 that Hermstedt travelled to Gotha with the prince's commission. Up to that time Spohr had not particularly favoured the clarinet, in fact it was only since his appointment as musical director at Gotha in 1805 that he finally resolved to compose seriously in addition to furthering his career as Germany's leading violin virtuoso.

The *Konzertstück* (Recitative and Adagio), once thought to have been written in 1804 or 1805 by Spohr for the Brunswick clarinetist Tretbach, is now known to be an arrangement by Tretbach of the slow movement of Spohr's Sixth Violin Concerto (G minor, Op.28). Thus, the First Clarinet Concerto (C minor, Op.26) is Spohr's first solo composition for clarinet. Tretbach later claimed that Spohr had written a concerto for him but this work is also spurious. Tretbach merely transcribed the first movement of Spohr's Sixth Violin Concerto, a slow movement from a work by Lindpaintner and the finale from a concerto by Krommer².

Hermstedt arrived in Gotha and played at one of the court subscription concerts. Spohr heard him and was much impressed with his "immense virtuosity, brilliance of tone and purity of intonation". He gladly assented to the terms of the commission under which he was to receive a handsome gratuity while, for the time being, Hermstedt was to retain possession of the manuscript. Greatly encouraged and stimulated, Spohr immediately began work on the C minor concerto and completed it in a few weeks. "I gave free rein to my fancy", he later wrote. Spohr personally delivered the work into Hermstedt's hands during January, 1809. The dedication was to the Prince of Sondershausen.

Spohr had sought Hermstedt's advice in general matters concerning the capabilities of the clarinet but even so he had paid too little attention to its limitations and had written passages that were impractical for an instrument still in the relatively early stages of its development. "Far from asking me to alter these passages", he wrote in the first edition of the work, "Herr Hermstedt sought to perfect his instrument". In all, Hermstedt made eight modifications to his clarinet in the form of extra keys and holes, improving the quality of some notes, enabling a greater variety of cross and false fingerings, giving more security in the top register and improving certain awkward trills.

Hermstedt was well rewarded for his labours. At the first performance in Sondershausen on June 16, 1809, the concerto was an instant and unqualified success, establishing him there and then as one of the foremost living virtuosos. The success of his future concert tours was assured. Spohr too was well satisfied, for the critics were united in their praise of the work; precisely the encouragement to compose further that he needed. Hermstedt played the concerto twice more that year (November 23 and 28) in Leipzig where it was subsequently published by Kühnel (later Peters Edition) as Op.26. A long and rewarding partnership was born and also cemented by the fact that both men were dedicated freemasons, like their idol Mozart.

It is not surprising that the first concerto was so successful. It is a masterpiece and for its time replete with strikingly original devices. The first movement opens with a slow introduction; a quiet drumroll introduces a yearning theme in the wind, rising to an orchestral climax with a flourish of trumpets. This leads to the *Allegro* and one of the most beautiful solo entries in all Spohr's concertos. Throughout his career, Spohr strove towards a symphonic conception of the concerto, One of the devices he utilised was the slow introduction. This features first in his music in the A major violin concerto of 1803-04 (WoO.12), of symphonic proportions, clearly derived from the practice of Haydn and Mozart in some of their mature symphonies. However, in this later concerto the introduction is not merely an effective curtain-raiser; it replaces the more

customary orchestral exposition and in a few bars sets the tone of the whole work.

The yearning theme becomes the movement's main idea and is subtly transformed to provide the second subject also. Spohr introduces a new idea *con espressivo* in the development as an alternative to the empty passagework common at this point in the concertos of most of his contemporaries. Generally, bravura passages in Spohr's concertos are derived from the thematic material, thereby increasing the unity of individual movements. Spohr undoubtedly drew some inspiration for this opening movement from Haydn's Symphony No.95 in C minor. The themes of the older composer's work and the way the minor key of the piece soon gives way to the major clearly had an impact on Spohr's movement. The crowning glory of the work is the all too brief *Adagio* in A♭ major. Delicately scored for clarinet, first and second violins, and cellos only, it provides an interlude of calm between the drama of the first movement and the brilliant exuberance of the finale. Some of Spohr's most endearing qualities are to be found in the *Adagio*; serene and lovely melody with a hint of chromaticism imparting a wistful flavour. The finale is a spirited rondo with the wind in the orchestra often taking over the solo role while the clarinet indulges in a wealth of accompanying figuration. There are some hair-raising triplet passages and a characteristic bitter-sweet twist to the second theme. Spohr shows his romantic leanings in the hushed ending of the work.

Hermstedt proved to have a voracious appetite for new works for, during the summer of 1809 Spohr composed for him a set of variations with orchestra on a theme from his opera *Alruna die Eulenkönigin*. Hermstedt first played the work on January 15 the following year in Weimar. However, the variations only whetted his appetite for a larger work and within months he was beseeching Spohr to write another concerto.

Spohr had little enough time to spare during the year 1810 for, in addition to working on his third opera, *Der Zweikampf mit der Geliebten*, he was asked to conduct at Germany's first music festival in Frankenhausen. Somehow, Spohr managed to complete the second concerto in time for Hermstedt to play it during the festival on July 20-21 when its performance was enhanced by the presence of Hermstedt's own Sonderhausen wind band players in the orchestra.

In spite of the speed of its composition, Spohr lavished great care on the Concerto in E♭ major, Op.57, which is even more brilliant than the earlier one – a *tour de force* for the soloist. It proved to be another great triumph for both Spohr and Hermstedt. The mood of the concerto is festive as befitted the occasion for which it was written, with greater importance attached to the orchestral tutti. The first movement opens with the more traditional orchestral exposition but the solo clarinet makes a brief appearance with the main theme before the first tutti. This early entry of the soloist is an attractive idea but may be an afterthought by Spohr or Hermstedt following the premiere and early performances before publication. I have examined a nineteenth century handwritten score which incorporates the brief opening solo flourish into the orchestral woodwind. This characteristic and convincing wind passage might easily represent Spohr's original version of the work's opening gestures. The movement bristles with energy and is punctuated with short, fanfare-like tutti. The thematic material is rich and varied; the opening theme is of the classical arpeggio type; the second theme is march-like; and a third theme which opens the development section is lyrical. The slow movement, again an *Adagio* in A♭ major but completely different from its predecessor, is cast in the German "bogen" (bow) form and is one of the finest that Spohr ever wrote. The opening section is written mainly in the clarinet's "chalumeau" register, at one stage the soloist being in canon with the bassoon. The horns herald the dramatic central section where, above throbbing triplets in the orchestra, a wide-ranging theme, derived from Spohr's violin style, is introduced. Towards the end of the movement, it is the turn of the flute to engage in gentle musical conversation with the soloist. The finale is

instantly appealing in Spohr's favourite rondo-polonaise style which bubbles over with *joie de vivre*.

Spohr pulls out all the stops as it were, and displays his complete mastery of the orchestra and new-found confidence in his technique. One contemporary critic wrote: "One does not know whether to listen to the soloist or to the wonderful wind parts in the orchestra; even the timpani are solo".

The second concerto lays great claim to being the finest of the four and is certainly one of Spohr's outstanding concertos. It is also a landmark in his career as a composer. What concerto by any contemporary could equal his achievement in this work? – only the concertos of Beethoven surpass it.

In 1811 Spohr was again invited to conduct at the Frankenhausen music festival (July 10-11), to write a symphony for the grand opening concert and to play a violin concerto. He also wrote "at Hermstedt's earnest solicitations" a potpourri for clarinet and orchestra in F major, Op.80, on themes from Winter's opera *Das unterbrochene Opferfest* (the interrupted sacrifice). The work is not so much a mere medley of the most popular tunes of the opera, for Spohr uses only two of them³, but rather a miniature concerto with the slow movement first (*Larghetto*, 6/8) followed by an *Allegro* (2/2) and finishing with an *Allegretto* (3/8). Hermstedt played the work again in Leipzig on August 15, 1812, and it proved to be popular with "virtuosos and connoisseurs".

When Spohr's opera was eventually produced in November, 1811, Hermstedt returned the favour by appearing in the orchestra at the first performance in Hamburg and Spohr was able to feature him as clarinet soloist in a bravura aria "Ich bin allein" (No.4 in the score). Some years later Spohr transferred this aria to the revised version of his opera *Faust*.

Spohr wrote no more solo compositions for the clarinet for nearly three years by which time he was orchestral leader at the Theater an der Wien. He did not neglect the clarinet, however, for during his residence in Vienna he wrote his ever-popular Nonet in F major, Op.31 (1813) for wind quintet and strings, and its superb companion work, the Octet in E major, Op.32 (1814). He also wrote for the basset horn in his opera *Faust* (1813), continuing the practice of Mozart who used these deeper toned melancholy sounding instruments (really clarinets in F) to conjure up the spirit of mystery and ritual.

Meanwhile Hermstedt did not remain faithful to Spohr, for in 1812 he offered Weber a fee approaching £10 for a concerto. Weber considered the offer and worked on a concerto for a time but never completed it. By this time, though, Spohr had written two more works for Hermstedt: the *Fantasia* in B \flat major, Op.81 on a theme of Danzi⁴ for clarinet and string quartet, and the *Notturmo* in C major, Op.34 for wind band previously referred to.

The *Fantasia* (1814), a revision of a Potpourri for violin and harp, is the finest of Spohr's concert pieces for the clarinet. A fiery and dramatic *Allegro molto* in B \flat minor with a contrasting second theme dolce leads to an *Andantino* with variations in the major key, introducing the Danzi theme. The *Allegro molto* section returns in a shortened version modulating to G major and a concluding *Andantino* in B \flat major. The clarinet writing includes some of the most difficult passages Spohr ever wrote with much variety in the figuration. The quartet never simply accompanies but contributes significantly to the musical argument⁵. Weber also used the same Danzi theme in his Grand Potpourri for cello and orchestra of 1808.

The *Notturmo* was arranged for a variety of instrumental combinations soon after it was first published but the only movement to achieve a separate "life" is the third, *Andante con Variazioni*, which brings the solo clarinet to the fore. This movement has been arranged for clarinet and piano or string quartet.

In 1821 Spohr settled in Gandersheim, his parents' home town, and determined to spend the summer quietly teaching and composing. He was interrupted by an urgent request from Hermstedt. This time, not merely content to beseech and beg, he even stooped to a little mild artistic blackmail. The directors of the baths at the spa of Alexisbad wanted Spohr to give a concert during the forthcoming season and Hermstedt pressed Spohr for another concerto which, if it were ready in time, he would play at the concert.

Spohr's own recollections of the concert were faint when he came to write his Autobiography years later but there can be little doubt that the concerto was a great success. Spohr had a high opinion of Hermstedt at this time. "Indisputedly", he wrote, "he is the foremost among the living virtuosos". At one time I held a poorish opinion of this fine work. In defence, I can say only that my first acquaintance with it was from a clarinet and piano score and an almost inaudible reel-to-reel tape of a radio broadcast from Berlin. The concerto may have been written in haste to meet the Alexisbad deadline but there is nothing hasty or routine in the workmanship.

The Third Concerto is different, though, in so much as it is the most overtly virtuosic of the four, with a fiery, restless energy supporting grand, sweeping themes of real distinction. Along with the shorter potpourris, this 'cavallo di battaglia' probably best matches what we know of Hermstedt's musical personality, a staggering technique and a fearless disregard of even the most severe difficulties. Some contemporaries hinted that his playing lacked finesse but all acknowledged the sheer excitement generated by his performances.

The fourth concerto, written seven years later, ranks among Spohr's finest compositions. Composed in 1828, the E minor concerto received its premiere at Hermstedt's hands on June 12, 1829, during the Nordhausen music festival. The prevailing mood is one of serenity, the relaxed atmosphere of the first movement being disturbed only once by a brief outburst. The slow movement is based on a long-note theme which must have taxed even Hermstedt's considerable powers. Whereas the opening movement might be said to be mellow, the slow movement is reflective and melancholy. The finale, a *Rondo al Espagnol*, is on the surface a joyous, good-humoured movement but there is an underlying feeling of sadness; the opening theme of the work is echoed in the arpeggio figuration at the close.

After the premiere at Nordhausen, Hermstedt appeared with the concerto in Sondershausen and on his concert tours. Nevertheless, the work remained generally unknown because Hermstedt retained possession of the manuscript, along with that of the third, until his death in 1846. Spohr wrote in his Autobiography that he knew nothing of the fate of the work and it did not appear in print until 1884 when, along with the third concerto, Breitkopf and Härtel published a clarinet and piano edition by Spohr's pupil Carl Rundnagel. Spohr's own autograph manuscript of the full score was discovered in 1960 in the library of the Sondershausen Wind Band by Dr Herbert Motschmann, director of the Gotha Stadt Museum, and a modern full score was published by Hans Schneider in 1976 as part of the Internationale Louis Spohr Gesellschaft edition of selected works. After Mozart's, it is certainly the most beautiful ever written for the instrument and the only one of Spohr's four composed for the A clarinet.

Spohr wrote only once more for Hermstedt. That was in 1837 when he was commissioned to write his *Sechs deutsche Lieder* with clarinet obbligato, Op.103, dedicated to Princess Mathilde of Sondershausen. Spohr's characteristic "Hermstedt" style is unmistakable and his incomparable technique is evident in the subtle interweaving of voice, clarinet and piano.

Spohr's last composition to feature the clarinet was the Septet in A minor, Op.147, for piano, flute, clarinet, horn, bassoon, violin and cello, which for many years was one of his least-known works but has happily been successfully revived in our own time⁶. He allows the clarinet to take a solo farewell by featuring it in the scherzo's second trio.

Over the past 30 years Spohr's clarinet concertos and his other works featuring the instrument have become better known. Eminent clarinetists all over the world have discovered them and it is the considered opinion of many that they stand among the peaks of the genre.

Let us hope that we continue to hear these fine works more and more as time goes on.

Notes

1. More on Hermstedt can be found in Pamela Weston's book, *Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past*, available from Fentone Music Ltd, Fleming Road, Earlstrees, Corby, Northants. NN17 2SN, UK, tel: 01536 60981, price £19.50.
2. Peter von Lindpaintner (1791-1856), German composer and conductor; Franz Krommer (Czech: František Kramár: 1759-1831), prolific Bohemian composer whose attractive wind octets and fine clarinet works have made a comeback in recent times.
3. Peter von Winter (1754-1825), Bavarian composer of mainly operas but also much chamber music. The "Opferfest" was his most famous work and was conducted by Spohr later in his career. The two themes used by Spohr are No.9, Myrha's aria "Ich war, wenn ich erwachte" and No. 18, the quartet "Kind, willst du ruhig schlafen".
4. Franz Danzi (1763-1826), an important link between the 18th century Mannheim school and romantic German opera. Now chiefly remembered for his wind quintets. The theme Spohr used may not have been originally by Danzi but possibly by Mozart's pupil Franz Süssmayer. See Clive Brown's article in *Spohr Journal 18*, 1991, "Variations on a theme of 'Danzi' ", page 11-14.
5. An orchestral version of Spohr's *Fantasie* was published by C. F. Schmidt around 1890 but its authenticity has not been confirmed though it has been recorded by John Denman. See the Discography which follows.
6. It is true that Spohr wrote for the clarinet in his unpublished Tenth Symphony of 1857 but the Septet was really his public farewell to the instrument, especially in view of its solo role in the Scherzo's second Trio.