

## THE 'SOLO' QUARTETS

by

Keith Warsop

Performances by Lady Halle (the violinist, Norman-Neruda) and others of Spohr's string quartets with some regularity during the 1880's brought on the composer the reputation that his works in this medium were little more than disguised violin concertos, far removed from the mainstream quartet style as established by the great Viennese classics. Spohr, argued the critics, kept all the interest in the first violin part, whilst the others merely provided an accompaniment.

When we turn to the Spohr quartets which were most frequently performed during the 1880's, we find that the critics were right, for they mainly conform to the 'solo' quartet, or 'quartours brillants' type. These works bear little relation in their distribution of the musical material among the four parts to Spohr's more regular quartets; formally they are like **miniature concertos**, but nevertheless, stylistically quite characteristic of the composer.

There are only six 'solo' quartets compared with the twenty-eight 'quartet' quartets and the two posthumous ones, and they were written by Spohr with a special purpose in mind, namely: for performance with himself taking the first violin part on concert tours to places where players of sufficiently high standards for quartet playing were not available; where there was no orchestra or where audience appreciation of chamber music was relatively primitive. On one occasion Spohr began a concert with one of his favourite Beethoven quartets (the op. 18 set) but was rather sharply told that the audience did not wish to hear such 'Baroque rubbish'. Instead, he had to perform one of Rode's trashy quartours brillants. (Spohr was in fact the first to play Beethoven's op. 18 quartets in Berlin, and considered the first of the set, the F major, to be a model of the genre. He also frequently introduced Haydn and Mozart into his concerts). It must be added that when first-class players were available Spohr always performed his quartets proper, in Paris in 1820 for example, where Cherubini was so impressed with his op. 45 **quartets**.

Naturally, in all Spohr's quartets the technical demands on all the players, not just the first violin, is high. He does not hesitate to give them passages of virtuosity, and at all times they participate in the presentation and development of the musical ideas. In this respect, he follows the practice of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven (op. 18 certainly) who all to a greater or lesser extent, favour the first violin. The important point to be borne in mind is that virtuosity, and not mere bravura display, is an integral part of Spohr's style.

Spohr's first 'solo' quartet op. 11 was composed in 1807, the year of his first quartets proper, the op. 4. The op. 11 quartet differs from the two op. 4 quartets in having only three movements; the scherzo or minuet is omitted, and the quartet concludes with a rondo finale, showing its kinship with the concerto.

Seven quartets and ten years later Spohr composed his second 'solo' quartet, in E major, op. 43. As in the earlier work, there are three movements, the third movement is marked 'Tempo di Menuetto'. Two years later came the B minor quartet, op. 61, and once again the three movement plan is retained. After settling in Kassel in 1822, Spohr wrote his fourth 'solo' quartet, in A major, op. 68, again in three movements. The work was completed in November 1823. Spohr did not write another 'solo' quartet until August 1829, when the op. 83, in Eb major was written. Spohr's post at Kassel kept him very busy, and there was not so many opportunities for touring; besides, now that he had a position for life, he did not need to earn his living by extensive touring. The Eb quartet has an 'Alla Polacca' finale - a definitive concerto trait.

The final 'solo' quartet, Lady Halle's favourite which she performed on no less than twelve occasions, was the op. 93, in A minor, composed in 1835. This was Spohr's only quartet of any type composed between the op. 84 of 1832, and the op. 132, of 1846. Like the previous examples, it keeps to the three movement plan, but features a slow introduction to the opening movement.

So, out of thirty-four published quartets, only six can be classed as 'solo'. It is a pity that Spohr's reputation as a legitimate contributor to the genre, and the fine music of his other quartets should be overshadowed by the critics' opinions of the last century.

The list below is of the 'solo' quartets only:

- No. 1 in D minor, op. 11 (1807)
- No. 2 in E major, op. 43 (1817)
- No. 3 in B minor, op. 61 (1819)
- No. 4 in A major, op. 68 (Nov. 1823)
- No. 5 in Eb major, op. 83 (Aug. 1829)
- No. 6 in A minor, op. 93 (Sept. 1835)