

SPOHR'S POTPOURRIS

by Keith Warsop

TODAY a potpourri is considered to be a kind of medley – a series of tunes strung together and more commonly found in lighter music circles such as park bandstand concerts. Even in Spohr's day such potpourris were the ones commonly found; for instance Hummel's *Grande Serenade en Potpourri*, Op.63 and its companion work, Op.66, both for clarinet, bassoon, violin, guitar and piano.

These pieces combine in an entertaining way hit tunes from favourite operas of the time, the composers featured including Boieldieu, Cherubini, Mozart, Nadermann, Spontini and Weigl as well as a Viennese folk-song.

But most of Spohr's potpourris are nothing like this. Instead they are carefully constructed, using variations on the themes, modulating transitions and in some cases recapitulations. In addition Spohr usually prefaces them with expressive slow introductions, an obvious pointer to his "high" artistic approach rather than a simple popular one. Spohr himself stated that he preferred the potpourris over standard variation form because they gave him "more artistic fantasia-like freedom than as variations."

Martin Wulforth has found that contemporary critics recognised that Spohr's potpourris transcended the common light idiom of such works and quotes a number of examples. For instance of the Potpourri for violin and small orchestra, Op.23, one reviewer said: "If one defines a potpourri as a collection of various favourite tunes, then Spohr knew how to lift such a trifle to a high level; nowhere does he deny his noble, rational manner of composition."

Another commented on the Potpourri for violin and piano, Op.42: "No other artist, whatever his name may be, treated this genre with so much wit and originality, ennobled it and raised it as much as Spohr did. One can say: he created it anew, in about the same manner as Haydn did for the concert minuet about fifty years ago."

Finally, the Potpourri for violin and piano, Op.56, brought the following praise: "One knows already how the excellent Spohr treated this genre of music, which *per se* is frivolous: he imbued it with a more serious spirit and more deeply penetrating art and brought it to high honours." (All reviews from the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*).

If we ask: how many potpourris did Spohr write?, we face a problem on three fronts. Firstly, Spohr recast five of them for other instrumental combinations – not just simple transcriptions but sometimes involving substantial recomposition; secondly, in two cases potpourris form the finales of two-movement sonatas for violin and harp; and thirdly, changes in taste led to some being published years later under the title "Fantasie".

He wrote his first potpourri in the summer of 1804 in preparation for his forthcoming winter concert tour. Accordingly it features a virtuoso solo violin part for Spohr himself to play, along with a simple accompaniment for a second violin, viola and cello, thus guarding against the problem of having to use less competent players during the tour.

The texture of solo violin together with a backing string trio had already been used by Pierre Rode, the French virtuoso whom Spohr had greatly admired when he heard him for the first time in July 1803. At that concert Rode played his Variations for solo violin with string trio, Op.10 and this made a big impression on Spohr who forthwith modelled his own playing style on that of Rode and took the French musician's own virtuoso works into his repertoire but clearly he felt inspired by the challenge of writing something on the same lines himself.

The Potpourri in G major, Op.5, uses a theme from the opera *Le petit matelot ou le mariage impromptu* of 1796 by the French composer Pierre Gaveaux (1761-1825). It begins with a ten-bar slow introduction in the minor, then the theme is introduced followed by a sequence of variations. An altered version of the introductory material leads to the second theme, an unidentified *Tempo di Menuetto* which may well be by Spohr himself for, as Martin Wulfhorst points out, it shares the same melodic contour as Gaveaux's tune and therefore could have been designed specifically for that purpose.

This minuet theme too has variations before Gaveaux's melody returns to herald the coda which, for a virtuoso work, has an unusual ending as the soloist plays demisemiquaver figurations while the tempo slows down *poco à poco ritardando* and the dynamics subside from *piano* to *pianissimo* and finally to *ppp*. The variations consist of, in the main, figurations of different patterns though Spohr follows classical models by inserting a slow minor key one.

The next three potpourris all include themes by Mozart and were composed fairly closely together. In 1806 Spohr wrote his first opera, the one-acter *Die Prüfung*, to be followed in 1808 by the "grand romantic opera" *Alruna*.

While working on these compositions Spohr made an intensive study of Mozart's operas and modelled some of his music on his hero's examples. He said that the overture to *Alruna* was "an exact imitation of the overture to *Zauberflöte* for that was the object I had in view", added "I had made many similar imitations of Mozart's masterpieces" and pointed to "the aria full of love-complaints in *Alruna* imitated from the beautiful aria of Pamina 'Ach, ich fühl's, es ist verschwunden'."

So it is little wonder that Spohr felt inspired to use Mozart themes in his three potpourris though in two of them other composers were also called on. The three works, all for a virtuoso solo violin, differ in form as well as instrumentation though there is evidence that Spohr was prepared to alter the supporting forces to suit the occasion.

Op.22 in B flat major, published as "Potpourri No.2", is scored for solo violin, string quartet and optional double-bass "for use in larger halls" though when Spohr played the work in Paris in 1821 he mentions wind instruments in the orchestra so it is clear that he also wrote an orchestral version though it was never published and appears to be lost.

Following a slow introduction marked *Adagio con espressione*, the first tune is a Russian folk melody. This had earlier been used by the Viennese composer Paul Wranitzky (1756-1808) as the second movement, *Russe: Allegretto*, of his Symphony in D major, Op.36, written around 1797. Spohr's version of the theme is almost identical to Wranitzky's so that it is possible he came across it in the symphony but on the other hand Russian tunes were circulating widely at this time, partly popularised by the fact that Russia and various German states were allies in attempting to resist Napoleon. Beethoven, of course, made use of them in his "Rasumovsky" string quartets.

After variations on the Russian tune the music modulates via imitative entries starting with the cello from B flat to G at which point, *Andante con espressione*, "Là ci darem" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is introduced. This too undergoes variations including one in testing double stops. The tempo changes to *Allegretto* and the time signature to 6/8 for the "andiam" section of the scene. The music eventually modulates back to B flat and the Russian theme returns. More flourishes from the soloist lead to a gentle coda which parallels Op.5 in slowing the tempo and reducing the dynamics but here the solo violin just winds down gently with a final reference to the Russian melody.

Martin Wulfhorst has suggested that this Potpourri mirrors a symphony in miniature: slow introduction; first movement (Russian air); slow movement ("Là ci darem"); scherzo ("andiam");

finale (return of Russian air); and coda. Certainly Spohr has found a perfect form to make Op.22 one of the most attractive and enjoyable of his potpourris.

The next Potpourri dates from April 1808 and Spohr tells us that the idea came to him of a contrapuntal combination which he could not wait to hear performed to see if his scheme worked in practice. The Potpourri No.3 in G major, Op.23, is scored for a small orchestra made up of solo violin, a flute, an oboe, a clarinet, two bassoons, two horns and strings. Unlike its companions it does not feature a slow introduction. Instead Spohr starts with a theme of his own invention, specially designed to work in counterpoint with one by Mozart.

Spohr himself has described the piece as follows: "This Potpourri begins with a cheerful G major *Allegro* with a brilliant solo part. It is followed by the G minor theme "Wer ein Liebchen hat gefunden" from *Die Entführung*. This theme is varied five times, alternating between major and minor, before it is taken over by the wind instruments in the sixth variation and developed for some time in free fugal entries. At the return of the main key the first horn plays and finishes the entire melody of the aria in the major. Simultaneously, very surprisingly, the solo violin repeats the introductory *Allegro*. Yet here it weaves around the theme of the variations as a quasi-fantasy, whereas it appeared earlier as an independent piece of music."

Yet at the first performance, while Spohr was delighted to find that his concept worked perfectly, he adds: "I was doomed to see my ingenious combination of the two themes was noticed by a few musicians only and was totally lost upon the rest of the audience." Nevertheless, Op.23 is a little gem and stands alongside Op.22 as a fully successful realisation of Spohr's aims.

In 1816 while Spohr and his family were on holiday in Switzerland preparing for their visit to Italy later that year, he composed a number of works to perform during the trip. Among them were some arrangement for violin and piano for Spohr and his wife, Dorette, to play together. This was necessary because it was impossible to take Dorette's harp with them so that she needed piano repertoire to replace the works for violin and harp which the couple had always featured in their concerts previously.

One of the arrangements was of the Potpourri, Op.23, but sadly this Potpourri, WoO.34, was never published and is today lost so that our only clue to Spohr's treatment of his original is the incipit in the thematic catalogue he kept of his own compositions. From the contrapuntal nature of Op.23 it is unlikely that Spohr made significant alterations except to give the piano a bigger share of the material; certainly the incipit points towards this conclusion with the key structure and themes unchanged.

The final Mozart potpourri, No.4 in B major, Op.24, written in the autumn of 1808, returns to the solo violin with string trio support which Spohr used in Op.5 and here both themes used are Mozart's. There is an ornate slow introduction in 12/8 time marked *Adagio con molto espressione* lasting for 30 bars. After a brief pause the accompanying strings play pizzicato in 6/8 and *Allegretto* before the soloist launches into Pedrillo's serenade from *Die Entführung*. A section of virtuoso passagework follows, there is a modulation to B flat major then an *Andante* section which acts as an introduction to "Batti, batti" from *Don Giovanni* and marked *Grazioso*.

The variations which ensue demand the utmost virtuosity from the soloist before the tempo changes to *Allegro vivace*, the time to 6/8 and the solo violin decorates the quicker section of "Batti, batti". The music then slows down gradually, there is just over a bar's pause and the music is back in B minor as Pedrillo's serenade is recapitulated quite simply without any virtuoso flights. The final sounds are of the pizzicato supporting strings *pianissimo*.

In Op.24 Spohr has returned to the simpler form of Op.5 after succeeding so well with the more sophisticated structures of Op.22 and Op.23. He appears to have been dissatisfied with his achievement here both tonally with the key sequences B major-B minor-B flat major-B minor

and with his treatment of the themes. Therefore, when he was preparing violin and piano pieces in Switzerland in 1816 he returned to Op.24 and overhauled it substantially.

The revision was published as Potpourri in E flat major, Op.42 and apart from altering the tonality Spohr replaced his ornate original slow introduction with a new one *Poco Adagio* in 3/4 time. He also dropped "Batti, batti" and replaced it with "Voi, che sapete" from *Le nozze di Figaro* as well as giving the piano part a greater share of the limelight.

Spohr's first four potpourris had all been written for himself, in the main to display his virtuosity as a violinist. In addition, as is shown by his reaction to the audience's failure to spot his contrapuntal combination in Op.23, he also hoped to demonstrate his compositional qualities.

The four potpourris are eminently suitable for both these purposes. They consist of single movements at the most about 15 minutes long with plenty of variety while the solo display is anchored to popular melodies.

In Spohr's next potpourri, he had to cater for another virtuoso rather than himself. However, as this was the clarinetist Simon Hermstedt for whom Spohr had already written two concertos and a set of variations, the style of virtuosic composition was already established. The Potpourri in F major, Op.80, dates from the spring of 1811 and was commissioned by Hermstedt for him to play at the Frankenhäusen Music Festival that July. Apart from strings the orchestra consists of pairs of flutes, oboes, bassoons and horns.

Spohr selected two numbers from the then highly popular opera, *Das unterbrochene Opferfest*, by the Mannheim composer Peter von Winter (1754-1825) and produced what is in effect a three-movement concertino. The opening section, *Larghetto*, in F major works with Myrha's aria "Ich war, wenn ich erwachte" and the prominent horns at the start have been lifted from the opera along with the theme. Next comes an *Allegro* in B flat major on a vocal quartet "Kind, willst du ruhig schlafen" then finally a 6/8 *Allegretto* version of the same theme.

Op.80 was another potpourri which Spohr later reworked for violin and piano. Ill-health finally forced Dorette to give up playing the harp after the couple's visit to England in 1820 and Spohr promised her he would compensate by writing some piano works for her.

The first of these was the well-known Piano and Wind Quintet in C minor, Op.52, on which Spohr had started before leaving London. Then in the spring of 1821 he "worked out anew" as he described it the Op.80 potpourri. Spohr said: "I considered it one of my most successful pieces and wished by this new elaboration of it to make it more generally known. It may be readily understood that in this transfer from the clarinet and orchestra to the violin and piano very considerable modifications were needed and that I could adhere chiefly only to the form and modulations of the earlier piece."

As the clarinet version remained unpublished until 1830, Spohr's wish to make the music more widely known is understandable and so he produced the Potpourri in E major, Op.56. With his revision of Op.24 Spohr had brought the piano into a more equal role with the violin and here he followed the same practice as well as transposing material into keys which provide more brilliance for the violin, so that F major and B flat major become E major and A major.

Also in 1811 Spohr composed his third Sonata Concertante for violin and harp, later published as Op.114. Unlike his previous sonatas which feature three movements in the standard fast-slow-fast format, Spohr here opts for two movements only, pairing a sonata form *Allegro vivace* with a finale which is a potpourri on themes from *Die Zauberflöte*.

All of the themes are from the second act so Spohr shunned popular numbers like "Bei Männern" or Papageno's "Der Vogelhändler" though, of course, Papageno's "Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen" does appear in this act and is therefore called upon.

Pamina's sorrowful "Ach, ich fühl's" in F sharp minor comes first; then the terzet of the three

boys “Seid uns zum zweiten Mal willkommen” in A major. The central section is based on the Papageno item in D major before moving to B minor and the duet of the two men in armour from the act’s finale “Der, welcher wandelt”. The final section is fast and furious, Monostatos’s “Alles fühlt der liebe Freuden” in B and D major.

Unlike the earlier potpourris, this one is basically a framework for the quotation of the various well-loved melodies with some flourishes and passagework thrown in. As such it comes closer to the medley than any of Spohr’s other potpourris though even in this simpler format there is extreme skill and sophistication in the way it is put together. It certainly became extremely popular and the Spohrs often performed it as a separate item away from the sonata’s first movement, so much so that in August-September 1820 Spohr transcribed it for violin and piano as Op.50. In the original version the harp already shared the limelight so that there were far fewer modifications needed to fit its new instrumentation than the arrangements of the other potpourris. Even the number of bars stayed at 263.

It was during Spohr’s years in Vienna that he composed his next potpourri in autumn 1814, also for violin and harp. For this one he chose themes by Abbé Georg Joseph Vogler (1749-1814) and Franz Danzi (1763-1826) though recent research by Clive Brown has traced the “Danzi” theme back to an insert-aria of 1793 by Franz Süssmayr (1766-1803), the man who completed Mozart’s Requiem (see *Spohr Journal* 18 of 1991). Vogler’s theme comes from his once popular opera *Castor und Pollox* while Danzi used “his” theme in a set of variations for clarinet and orchestra.

Although billed as a “potpourri” when it was performed in 1814, by the time it achieved print in 1845 changing tastes led to the publisher labelling it as a fantasie. Furthermore, the title page of this first edition reads: “Fantaisie sur des Thèmes de Händel et Abbé Vogler” even though nothing by Handel appears in the work! Presumably the publisher thought it would improve sales by attaching the name of such a great master as Handel to the title.

The potpourri opens with a fiery and dramatic *Allegro molto* in B minor with a contrasting second motif *dolce*. The stormy music returns and heralds an *Andantino* with variations in A major, introducing the Danzi theme. The third variation eventually leads to Vogler’s theme *Allegretto* which is treated to five variations before “Danzi” returns, firstly in F sharp major before moving back to its original A major. Here the violin stays with the theme while the harp is put through its paces with some stunning virtuoso display work right up to the final bar.

Hermstedt had arrived in Vienna around the time Spohr wrote this potpourri and was present at its première. He liked it so much that he beseeched Spohr to arrange a version for clarinet and so arose the now well-known piece *Fantasie and Variations on a Theme of Danzi* for clarinet and string quartet, Op.81.

This is not strictly a potpourri as Spohr removed the Vogler material completely so there is only a single theme involved though Spohr’s own introductory music remains. Spohr kept this fiery opening but transposed to B flat minor with the Danzi theme itself in the major, B flat, of course, being a much more suitable clarinet key. At the point where the Vogler theme had appeared Spohr instead brought back his minor key *Allegro molto* before modulating to G major (instead of the original F sharp major) and Danzi’s theme which then returns to B flat major.

The Danzi sections in Op.81 are similar to those in Op.118 though with some reworking to fit the clarinet and merging the violin and harp lines into one for the single solo instrument.

Although Op.81 was published in 1830 with an accompaniment for string quartet (together with an arrangement for clarinet and piano), an optional double-bass part also circulated, then in 1890 a set of full orchestral parts was published though the print gives no clue if these emanate from Spohr, Hermstedt or a later nineteenth century arranger.

Spohr's next potpourri was also for violin and harp. Here he followed the two-movement model of Op.114 with his Sonata in G major, WoO.36, composed early in 1819. A sonata form Allegro is followed by a potpourri on themes from Spohr's just completed opera *Zemire und Azor*. Unfortunately this sonata remained unpublished and today is lost so we have no idea how Spohr handled this particular potpourri though surely he would have found room for the opera's hit tune, Zemire's Romanza "Rose wie bist du reizend und mild!" (known in England as "Rose, softly blooming").

During his concerts in London in 1820 Spohr continued to play his potpourris, especially two of which he was specially proud, Op.22 and Op.23, both including Mozart themes, though the critics were a bit unkind about hearing such well-loved melodies incorporated in virtuoso display pieces.

For his benefit concert, though, Spohr composed a potpourri in April 1820 designed to pay tribute to his hosts, the Potpourri on Irish Melodies, Op.59. He got the idea after attending a society party at which the Duke of Sussex sang to him some English and Irish songs, accompanying himself on his guitar. The three tunes Spohr chose come from the hugely popular settings published in London in 1808, musical arrangements by Sir John Stevenson to words by the well-known poet Thomas Moore.

First comes the air "Noch Bonin Shin Doe" with Moore's verses starting "They may reil at this life from the hour I began it, I've found it a life full of kindness and bliss"; then comes "The Girl I left behind me" (Moore: "As slow our ship her foamy track against the wind was clearing"); and finally "Fague a Ballagh" (Moore: "To ladies' eyes around, boy, we can't refuse, we can't refuse").

Hartmut Becker makes the point that despite the title, this potpourri resembles Spohr's Eighth Violin Concert, the *Gesangszene*, in being a through-composed concerto in three sections with an introduction, a slow middle movement and a lively finale, though using borrowed melodic material.

The potpourri begins in A minor with a typical Spohr slow introduction, *Andante grave*, before moving to the major and the first Irish tune, *Andantino*. The second section, *Larghetto*, is in the minor, then there is an *Allegretto* transition to the merry final *Allegro*. As Hartmut Becker explains, Spohr did not follow the simple path of writing virtuoso passagework variations on each tune; instead he underlined the different character of the melodies with three different compositional techniques, the first movement having two brilliant variations, the second being developed in the manner of a fantasy and the finale turning to rondo form.

Op.59 was Spohr's final potpourri to use melodies from outside sources. With his move to Kassel from the beginning of 1822 his composing priorities changed with opera taking a bigger share of his energies throughout the 1820s. The earlier potpourris had been intended to display his talent as a virtuoso violinist or Hermstedt as a clarinetist but in Kassel his aim was to promote the music of his operas.

Following the huge success of *Jessonda* from its first performance on 28th July 1823 Spohr quickly prepared a couple of potpourris on motifs from the opera. In September 1823 he composed the Potpourri in A minor for violin, Op.66 and in November the Potpourri in A flat major for violin and cello, Op.64.

Although these two works include plenty of display for the solo instruments in which the cellist must match the virtuosity of the violinist, they differ from most of the earlier potpourris which offered variations on the chosen themes along with introductions and transitions. Instead Spohr followed the procedure he had adopted in his 1811 potpourri on *Die Zauberflöte* by paraphrasing whole chunks of music from his source. Obviously, he made adjustments to cater

for the two solo string instruments but sometimes gave them the original vocal line while inserting passagework where appropriate.

Op.66 works with four extracts from *Jessonda*, an *Andante grave* introduction leading to material from the overture, then, *Allegro moderato*, music from Act One's finale in which the young Brahmin Nadori arrives to tell Jessonda that she must perish on the funeral pyre of her late husband, the Rajah. The potpourri picks up at the point where Amazili, Jessonda's sister, breaks in with the words "Kannst du mir die Schwester retten", a plea to Nadori to help to save Jessonda.

Then, *Andantino*, comes one of the opera's hit numbers from Act Two, the first part of the love duet between Amazili and Nadori "Schönes Mädchen, wir mich hassen". Finally, another hit number, also from Act Two, Tristan's aria "Der Kriegeslust ergeben", *Allegro moderato* in Spohr's favourite polonaise rhythm brings the potpourri to a rousing conclusion.

The potpourri for violin and cello in effect allocates the music of the two pairs of lovers to the solo instruments, that of Jessonda and Amazili to the violin and Tristan and Nadori to the cello. The work opens *Andante* in A flat major with music from the start of the finale to Act Two where Jessonda is being escorted by the Bayaderes to be bathed in the sacred waters before her immolation. They sing "Aus der Wellen heil'gen Schoß", then Spohr moves to the recognition scene between Tristan and Jessonda soon afterwards with Tristan's "Licht der Augen", *Allegro moderato*. The second part of the "Schönes Mädchen" duet follows, from "Alles könnt ich für dich wagen" with the music now *Allegro* and closing ecstatically.

As Spohr gradually cut down on his public appearances as a violin virtuoso, preferring more and more to concentrate on conducting or playing chamber music, his need for potpourris disappeared but in 1841 he returned to the form though not to the title. By this time the term potpourri had fallen into disfavour so instead he wrote the *Fantasie* in D major for violin and piano, Op.117 on themes from his 1830 opera, *Der Alchymist*.

This work is nearer to a salon piece, as it lacks the compositional sophistication of many of the works considered here, though at 471 bars it is easily longer than any of Spohr's earlier potpourris, mainly because he includes five extracts from the opera. The work is in the main a simple arrangement of the selected parts of *Der Alchymist* without the amount of the virtuoso element which featured in the other potpourris.

It begins with the slow introduction to the overture, then come two items from Act Two, first the scene and chorus "Sieh jene Schar sich jubelnd hierher wenden", then Paola's Romanza "Aben hamet!". Next is an extract from Act Three, Vasquez's aria "Du hast, o Gott!" and finally Spohr returns to Act Two with another aria for Paola, "Ach zu fernen schönen Tagen."

Literature

Martin Wulforst: *Louis Spohr's Early Chamber Music (1796-1812): A contribution to the history of nineteenth-century genres* (Dissertation: The City University of New York, 1995), especially Part 2, Chapter 5, "Short Display Pieces for chamber and orchestral scoring."

Hartmut Becker: Booklet notes to compact discs, CPO 999751-2 (2000) for Potpourri, Op.23; and CPO 999798-2 (2004) for Potpourri, Op.59.