SPOHR

Symphonies Nos. 2 and 9

Slovak State Philharmonic Orchestra
Alfred Walter

Louis SPOHR (1784–1859)

Symphony No. 2 in D minor, Op. 49

Symphony No. 9 in B minor, Op. 143, 'Die Jahreszeiten' (The Seasons)

"I first wrote a symphony and played it for the first time at one of the concerts which I had to conduct, April 10, 1820. At its rehearsal it met with very great approbation both from the orchestra and the numerous persons who were present; but in the evening it was received with real enthusiasm. I had in part to thank the numerous and particularly excellent stringed instruments of the orchestra for this brilliant success, and in this composition I had given them a special opportunity of exhibiting their skill in playing with purity and precision of ensemble. In fact, as regards the string instruments, I have never since heard that symphony given with so much effect as on that evening."

So Spohr, writing his memoirs many years later, remembered the first performance of his *Second Symphony* which he composed in London in three weeks during March, 1820, soon after his arrival there on a four-month contract to conduct, perform as solo violinist and orchestral leader, and compose music for the Philharmonic Society of London. It was the first of Spohr's six visits to England and has become famous for his claim to have introduced baton conducting to London concerts. Briefly, it has now been established that Spohr's memory was at fault; he indeed used his baton at the rehearsal but gave way to tradition at the concert in which a 'conductor' presided at a pianoforte. But his claim is true in a broader sense since, though he gave up the baton, he did not give up the direction of the orchestra. Instead of leaving this to the figurehead at the piano, Spohr, as leader, used his violin bow to conduct the music throughout. As one reviewer noted: "He held his violin under his arm and gave the beat with motions of his bow, also he gave a sign whenever there was an entry of a new section to show where it should begin."

The symphony was certainly calculated to meet the English taste, with Haydn's *London* symphonies as the background model, especially in the sparkling finale (note especially that movement's witty Haydnesque second subject). Emotionally the earlier movements cover a wider spectrum. The opening *Allegro* especially exemplifies that strain of 'noble melancholy' which Spohr's contemporaries particularly identified with his style. Although the composer was at this time a contented and successful artist and a happily married man with three beloved daughters, his feelings about serious matters in the wider world were by no means superficial. Whether deep convictions about artistic, ethical and political matters have influenced various well-known symphonies is a viewpoint often argued about. There is no direct evidence to show that Spohr's *Second Symphony* deals with such things, yet at the very time of its composition Spohr had a major political drama on his mind. As a Freemason and a disciple of the Philanthropinists (an

Enlightenment educational movement named after the Philanthropin schools established in Germany) Spohr had been carried away by the patriotic movement for German unity and democracy during the declining period of Napoleon's power. By 1820, however, Metternich's repressive reactionary system was in place throughout Europe, and freedom activists were driven underground. When a Protestant student of theology, Ludwig Sand, assassinated the dramatist (219 plays!) and diplomat August von Kotzebue, who had been condemned to death by a Heidelberg student organisation as an alleged Russian secret agent, Spohr replied to a friend's letter which described Sand's public execution: "Your account of Sand's death moved me very deeply. I had hoped to the last that the Heidelberg students would find a way to free him and smuggle him out of the country. Without approving of his deed one must admire his heroism" ("I did it for the sake of Germany", Sand said in a speech from the scaffold). Sand's execution took place in May, 1820, while Spohr was in London and the *Second Symphony* was composed during the period Spohr was still hoping for his rescue. Such things as the noble melancholy of the first movement, the dramatic climax at the centre of the *Larghetto* and the menace of the *Scherzo* show a composer able to import strong feelings into his music. Nevertheless, as an Enlightenment man, Spohr believed in controlled passion so he retains a balance in the symphony with such things as the lilting *ländler*-like trio and the life-enhancing good humour of the finale.

Formally, Spohr makes a notable innovation at the start of his symphony. The conventional slow introduction is replaced by a quick introduction in the main *Allegro* tempo. This introductory material permeates the whole movement, having links with the main themes. The orchestration has a chamber music quality about it and, overall, Spohr's 'London Symphony' is his most immediately attractive work in the form – an orchestral counterpart of the popular nonet, albeit with a wider emotional palette – with much delightful writing for the wind instruments. The Haydn influence must have helped to establish the work in the favour of the British public for much of the century. By the 1840s reviewers were vying with each other to praise it: "The most perfect orchestral composition of Spohr"; "ranks justly with instrumental triumphs of Beethoven and Mozart"; "the most lovely and perfect orchestral work of Spohr", were some of the comments of the time. The English composer William Sterndale Bennett loved it and conducted it many times at the Philharmonic Society concerts.

On 18th January, 1843, Spohr conducted Robert Schumann's *'Spring' Symphony* in one of his Kassel concerts. In a letter beforehand (dated 23rd November, 1842) Schumann outlined a number of points over which a conductor should be especially careful, and then added: "I wrote the Symphony at the end of winter in 1841, if I may say so, in the midst of that longing for spring which overpowers us even at the ripest age and overtakes us anew every year. I did not wish to depict or paint but I believe that the period during which the Symphony originated affected its formation and how it came to be just as it is."

Seven years later, on 22nd January, 1850 (according to the part of Spohr's memoirs added by his heirs): "a sharp unexpected frost having set in during the night, he slipped and fell with such violence as to inflict a very severe blow on his head, from the consequence of which the unremitting care of his experienced medical attendant Dr. Harnier did not restore him till after the lapse of several weeks." Shortly after his recovery, he wrote his *Ninth Symphony, The Seasons*, the plan of which had much occupied his mind during his illness, and as he himself complained, "regularly haunted me during the long sleepless and feverish nights". It is tempting to imagine that the words of Schumann may have had some influence on the shape of Spohr's symphony, especially "of that longing for spring which overpowers us even at the ripest age" as Spohr completed the work around the time of his 66th birthday in April, 1850. Certainly, the form in which Spohr cast his symphony highlights this longing, with Part One opening in the depths of winter, then being followed by the transition to spring. Similarly, Part Two opens in the heat and drowsiness of summer and is followed by the transition to autumn.

Spohr did not issue a detailed programme for the symphony; he surely hoped that listeners would find their own seasonal approaches to the music. So one such listener might imagine that the loud chords which punctuate the opening material are equated to the cold blast of winter which greets us when we open the door to venture out into the blizzard; the passages for woodwind and pizzicato strings have an icy atmosphere about them — icicles, if one wants to be really fanciful — and the second subject moves with a dragging gait, as if one is trying to walk into a headwind. Spohr's orchestration is spare and plain, giving a bleak feel to things, with that monotone effect that winter can bring to the countryside. Winter goes out in imposing fashion but spring emerges tentatively with a melting of winter's motives and a hint of birdsong. When fully launched, spring is enthroned to a slow *ländler* (a much simpler predecessor of *What the flowers tell me* from Mahler's *Third Symphony*). It is accompanied by birdsongs and contrasted with a central quick country dance. Summer stands at the boundary of the high romantic era as divided strings hint at Bruckner and Elgar to give the impression of a sultry summer day. Then come distant sounds of thunder, by courtesy of Berlioz, but Spohr does not overdo this and overall this *Largo* is a most impressive movement. Distant horn-calls lead into autumn which involves hunting rhythms, a drinking-song – the *Rheinweinlied Bekränzt mit Laub den lieben vollen Becher* from J.A.P. Schulz's *Lieder im Volkston* – and uninhibited orchestration; listen for the horns whooping it up.

Behind all this, however, can be discerned a deeper process – from death to rebirth or from darkness to light – which draws together several elements in Spohr's own life and beliefs, especially his ethical and political ones. Spohr was avid to see the political rebirth of Germany, and the revolutions of March 1848 which swept across Europe rekindled his enthusiasm for the future of democracy. Some months before, in his *English Symphony* of 1847, Spohr took the path of escapism, particularly in the last two movements, which evaded the problems posed in the first two by creating a fantasy world of childlike innocence. During 1849, as attempts to re-impose authoritarian rule began to succeed, Spohr refused an invitation to perform in Breslau, where martial law had been imposed. He wrote: "In a town where martial law has been proclaimed and the fundamental rights of the Germans guaranteed by the National Assembly have been set to naught, I would find myself unable to breathe, let alone to make music." Adding that he hoped to come in 1850 when things would have been decided one way or the other, he said: "Either we shall have attained our lofty goal, or we

shall have sunk back into the old slavery. In the first case, one can again devote oneself wholeheartedly to the glorious art! But if a relentless fate should bring about the second eventuality, one will have to bury oneself in art so as to forget the misery of the times." It is undoubtedly the burying oneself in art so as to forget the misery of the times that is the direction taken by the (pre-March 1848) *Eighth Symphony.*

In the *Ninth*, the winter 'waste land' which had devastated the democratic spirit and enslaved liberty evokes Spohr's gloom for the misery of the times. The 'garden of Eden' imagery of spring perhaps reflects Spohr's nostalgia for happy times long gone, while in summer the tone poet dreams of future liberty with the 'waste land' transformed into fertile soil in which freedom can blossom (this was an *idée fixe* of Spohr's in relation to tyrants: in his 1840 oratorio *The Fall of Babylon*, after the downfall of Belshazzar, the soprano sings *'The wilderness now shall its verdure resume, the desert rejoicing, with roses shall bloom'*, and Spohr was also an ardent rose-grower!) – and finally, in autumn, Spohr turns his back on escapism, joining in the real world exemplified by the incorporation of the *Rheinweinlied* as liberated humanity celebrates. The symphony ends in a positive mood so that "the longing for spring which overpowers us even at the ripest age" is, in the autumn of Spohr's life, transformed into a longing for liberty and democracy. A year later, in March 1851, when the repression had worsened, Spohr, writing to a friend, showed that his hopes were still alive: "If I were not too old I would get out this instant with my family, but sadly I must stay and put up with things. But I still hope to live to see the German people once again throw off their chains and chase their demoralised princes out of the country." In the words of the German Spohr scholar Martin Wulfhorst: "In complete contrast to the common cliché of the lonely, tortured romantic artist, Spohr was firmly rooted in the real world and enjoyed company, parties and celebrations." In the *Ninth Symphony'*s finale, the celebration is that of Spohr's democratic ideals.

Keith Warsop
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Alfred Walter

Alfred Walter was born in Southern Bohemia in 1929 of Austrian parents. He studied at the University of Graz and in 1948 was appointed assistant conductor to the Opera of Ravensburg. At the age of twenty-two he became conductor of the Graz Opera, where he continued until 1965, while serving at Bayreuth as assistant to Hans Knappertsbusch and Karl Böhm. From 1966 until 1969 he was Principal Conductor of the Durban Symphony Orchestra in South Africa, followed by a period of fifteen years as General Director of Music in Münster. In Vienna he worked as guest conductor at the State Opera and in 1986 was given the title of Professor by the Austrian Government. In 1980 he was awarded the Golden Medal of the International Gustav Mahler Society. For Marco Polo, Alfred Walter recorded more than twenty volumes of the label's Johann Strauss II Edition, works by von Schillings, von Einem, de Bériot, Reinecke and all the symphonic works of Furtwängler and Spohr. Alfred Walter passed away in 2005.

Slovak State Philharmonic Orchestra

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The Slovak State Philharmonic, Košice was established in 1968 as the second professional symphony orchestra in Slovakia. It is based in Košice, the capital of Eastern Slovakia, a city with a population of over a quarter of a million. Košice is a seat of the constitutional court, and has four universities, numerous research institutes, theatres, galleries and museums. The first concert of the newly founded orchestra was given in April 1969 under the then chief conductor Bystrík Režucha. In a short time the orchestra won wide recognition among both professional and general audiences and became one of the leading representatives of Slovak music in Slovakia and abroad. The nearly 90-strong ensemble includes professional musicians who are graduates of conservatories and famous music academies. Great success has been achieved with concerts in many European countries and also in leading cities in Asia. The orchestra has performed at international music festivals held in important cultural centres of the world, including Vienna, Salzburg, Berlin, Budapest, Prague, Antwerp, Lisbon, Barcelona, Athens, Reims, Hong Kong, Luxembourg, and New York. In 1994

the orchestra undertook a month-long tour of the United States, marking its first appearance in America. In addition to performances for radio and television, there have been more than 130 commercial recordings, many of them for Naxos and Marco Polo. These include rare repertoire, as well as participation in the Marco Polo recordings of the complete works of the younger Johann Strauss and of his brother Josef Strauss. Since 1991 the orchestra has been the only one in the Slovak republic to hold two international festivals: the Košice Music Spring Festival and the International Organ Festival of Ivan Sokol. The orchestra has also organised the Festival of Contemporary Art since 2003. The orchestra's current principal conductor is Zbyněk Müller.

Composed in London, Spohr's *Second Symphony* was received with real enthusiasm at its première, the audience responding to the work's tasteful Haydnesque flourishes, wide emotional palette and delightful writing for wind instruments. Written in 1850, a year after the re-imposition of authoritarian rule in Germany, *Symphony No. 9 'The Seasons'* is no mere programmatic work but a symbolic journey from the winter darkness of political oppression through the 'Garden of Eden' imagery of Spring, and the vibrant colours of Summer, ending with Autumn whose positive finale is a celebration of the composer's belief in the political rebirth of Germany.

DDD

8.555540

Playing Time
57:44

Louis
SPOHR
(1784–1859)

Symphonies Nos. 2 and 9

Symphony No. 2 in D minor, Op. 49 (1820) — 30:40

1	Allegro	11:56	3	Scherzo: Presto	5:54
2	Larghetto	5:45	4	Finale: Vivace	7:05

Symphony No. 9 in B minor, Op. 143 'Die Jahreszeiten' (The Seasons) (1850) — 26:44

	Part One			Part Two	
5	Der Winter (Winter): Allegro maestoso	8:43	8	Der Sommer (Summer) Largo	4:58
6	Der Übergang sum Frühling (The transition to Spring) L'istesso tempo	0:42	9	Einleitung zum Herbst (Prelude to Autumn) Allegro vivace	0:30
7	Der Frühling (Spring) Moderato	5:37	10	Der Herbst (Autumn) L'istesso tempo	6:14

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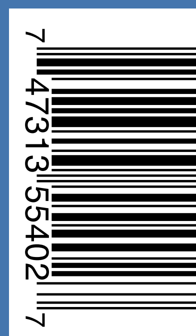

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