

“...HIS INSIGHT INTO THE CHARACTERS OF THE MOST DIVERSE COMPOSITIONS AND HIS ABILITY TO PERFORM EACH IN ITS *OWN SPIRIT*”:

# LOUIS SPOHR AND THE MODERN CONCEPT OF PERFORMANCE

home

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Revised translation of the author's article “Louis Spohr und die moderne Konzeption der werkorientierten Interpretation: ‘...seine Einsicht in den Geist der verschiedensten Kompositionen, und seine Kunst, jede in diesem ihrem Geist darzustellen’” (*Das Orchester* 46/7-8 [July-August 1998], pp. 2-9). By kind permission of Schott Musik International, Mainz.

**T**HE revival of Spohr's oeuvre during the past decades and the concomitant musicological exploration of his life and works have brought a gradual revision of the general view of Spohr's historical achievements. Today we recognise him as one of the leading musicians of his age who shaped early nineteenth-century musical life through his wide-ranging activities as a composer, violin virtuoso, chamber musician, conductor, director of major opera houses and music festivals, and musical journalist. Yet at least one important facet has not been sufficiently studied so far – Spohr's contributions to the development of the modern concept of the ‘autonomous’ work of art and to the development of the closely related modern concept of performance as a realisation of the composer's intentions (Wulfhorst 1995:114-19).

## A Pioneer of a Novel Performance Concept

The notion that the performance must, above all, serve the composition and that the performer must strive to realise its author's ideas is not likely to be questioned by any modern-day musician, living in the age of ‘historical’ or ‘authentic’ performance practice. But to Beethoven's contemporaries it appeared revolutionary. Far into the nineteenth century opera singers and virtuosos commonly used the musical text as a mere collection of material and as a rough guideline for their performances (Dahlhaus 1988:138). Yet at the turn of the eighteenth century a novel concept of performance emerged, in particular in connection with the reception of the classical Viennese string quartet: the individual composition moved into the centre of the musical culture, and the performance became subordinated to it. The moment when this idea gained popularity represented perhaps the most significant caesura in the history of Western musical performance since the advent of notation. The genesis of the new concept is still partially in the dark but, as shall be demonstrated here, Louis Spohr certainly played a key role in its evolution – as he did in the history of other musical innovations, from the chin rest to the conducting baton to operatic through-composition and *leitmotiv* technique.

A remark about the quartet genre in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (AMZ) of 1810 represents probably one of the earliest documents for the emergence of the novel performance aesthetics:

In addition [to playing correctly and in time], the quartet player must appropriately penetrate into the character of the composition and come to an agreement about it with his partners. After they have reached unanimity about this character, everyone must only strive to fit into the whole, while renouncing his individuality. (AMZ 5/16/1810:521)

Even six years before the publication of this article, Friedrich Rochlitz, in the same journal, praised the twenty-year-old Spohr, who just had made his debut in the Leipzig *Gewandhaus*, for exactly the same ability:

...his insight into the characters of the most diverse compositions and his ability to perform each in its *own spirit* – this is what renders him a true artist. We never had to admire this last quality in any violinist as much as in Mr. Spohr, especially in his quartet performances. He appears almost completely different when he performs, for instance, Beethoven (his favourite whom he treats

excellently) or Mozart (his ideal) or Rode (whose grand quality he knows very well to adopt, without bordering, like him, on sounding sharp and harsh, while falling short of him only slightly, especially in the volume of his tone), or when he performs Viotti and galant composers: *he* is different as *they* are different. (AMZ 12/26/1804:202-3)

Rochlitz's review drew public attention not only to young Spohr's violinistic and compositional talents but also to his novel performance style. Spohr had already developed this concept several years earlier and had received praise for it on at least one other occasion. In the diary of the eighteen-year-old Spohr one finds a critical remark about the inability of his teacher, Franz Eck, "to penetrate into the spirit of other musicians' compositions" (diary 1802 in Spohr 1968/I:20). In November 1804 Spohr's differentiated performance style impressed the host of a quartet *soirée* in Magdeburg: "Mr. Türpen claimed that I, like no one else, was able to interpret each composer in his individual style" (diary 11/9/1804 in Spohr 1968/I:74). A series of other, similar remarks in Spohr's diaries and AMZ articles documents how his revolutionary performance style later attracted attention in the European musical centres and everywhere where perceptive musicians heard him play. A typical contemporary testimony is a remark of his student Heinrich Joseph Wassermann about his "art to perform any composition in its spirit" (letter 5/28/1810 in Beer 1991:39). Not surprisingly, Spohr's foremost criterion for judging other artists was their ability or inability "to penetrate into the spirit of the composition" (e.g. Spohr 1968/I:104 and 132, AMZ 3/7/1821:157).

That Spohr thus became the pioneer of a novel concept of performance is no coincidence. After all, this concept formed an integral component of a comprehensive aesthetic system, which allowed him at a young age to become one of the protagonists of a new musical culture. Central to his aesthetic beliefs, which were shaped by the enlightened spirit of his parents' and grandparents' homes and later strengthened by contacts with freemasons and Philanthropinists, was the conviction that it is the artist's role "to devote himself to ennobling the spirit" (diary 10/1802 in Spohr 1968/I:28). The process of "ennobling" was part of the quest for moral and aesthetic perfection propagated by Enlightenment philosophers and masons. Among the arts, music lends itself particularly well to the "ennobling" of raw, natural material: music "turns into true art by deviating from nature, whereas all the other arts are limited to imitating nature". A logical consequence of emphasising the "ennobling" and 'ennobled' quality of music is the belief in the special rank of the individual composition – as a 'noble', autonomous creation, which deserves and warrants the performer's unconditional devotion.

The novel concept of the individual work of art was based on a firm foundation of interrelated philosophical, social, and aesthetic elements: first, the orientation of Enlightenment philosophy and eighteenth-century social movements towards the individual person; second, the emancipation of the middle class, whose self-confidence was based not on birth but on the individual's achievements; and third, an increased esteem for the individual work of art and, consequently, the principle of intellectual and creative authorship, the copyright, the postulate of artistic originality, and the re-evaluation of the freelance composer's profession.

## Two Musical Cultures and Two Concepts of Performance

A close link between social and aesthetic factors characterised not only the new, 'second' music culture, which formed the framework for Spohr's novel performance style, but also the traditional, 'first' music culture, which persisted into the nineteenth century. Each of the two musical cultures was defined by a particular constellation of interrelated components such as audience structure, economic factors, repertoire, manner of reception, playing style, type of interpretation, and 'work' conception.

The 'first' culture was epitomised by the operatic performance or the virtuoso's public concert. With technical brilliance the vocal or instrumental soloist strove to entertain and dazzle the "large, dominant" or "uncultivated crowd" – to use Spohr's words – in order to earn as much money as possible (Spohr 1968/I:102 and 267, AMZ 12/5/1821). The repertoire for this kind of self-representation consisted mainly of virtuosic pieces, preferably the soloist's own, most recent compositions (letter 4/15/1821 in La Mara 1892:126). As evident from Spohr's remarks about his *La Scala* debut and other concerts on his Italian tour in 1816-17, the soloist's playing style – tailored to the audience's taste and adapted to the large size of the halls – was "simple, grand", and brilliant and lacked those subtle nuances that were reserved for chamber-

music performances (diary 9/28/1817 in Spohr 1968/I:252, 3/22/1817 in Spohr II:19). The 'work' was identical with the performance, while the musical text merely served as a basis.

The 'second' culture, in contrast, comprised primarily the private musical activities of the middle class and aristocracy – the so-called "music parties" (Wulfhorst 1995:141-73). Here economic interests played no significant role. In smaller rooms and in an atmosphere characterised by the interplay of educational zeal and entertainment, highly motivated chamber musicians, to a large degree unaffected by the virtuoso's vanity, strove to interpret especially the demanding quartets and other chamber works of the classical Viennese composers in their individual styles. The fundamental difference to the 'first' culture was the relation between 'work' and performance, between composer and interpreter. What represented a goal in the 'first' culture – virtuosity – served as means here. The 'work' was identical with the sum of the composer's intentions, which the performer strove to realise. Spohr frequently spoke out against the display of virtuosity for its own sake, and especially in his quartet performances the playing technique was subordinated to the musical conception (Spohr [1833]:246). For him it was not important in the quartet "that an individual player shows off but rather that all four players penetrate into the composer's idea in the same manner and bring it to life" (Spohr [1833]:246).

The audiences at early nineteenth-century music parties were for the most part musically educated and consisted to a considerable degree of music lovers and professional musicians. The pendant to the devoted playing style described here was an attentive, concentrated listening mode, which the repertoire required and which Spohr himself demanded explicitly. His aversion to the aristocracy's common habit to degrade music to a pleasant background noise for dinners, card games, or conversation apparently brought him to interrupt or cancel performances on the few occasions when he happened to find an uneducated or unattentive audience (Spohr 1968/I:23, 78-79, 82, 107).

Essential to the repertoire choice of the 'second' culture was the conviction that the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, especially their quartets, represented creations of superior, lasting value and deserved to be played and heard for their intrinsic qualities, instead of providing mere material for the soloist's self-representation. The idea of the 'classical' repertoire – in the development of which Spohr played a leading role too – crystallised approximately at the same time as the modern concept of the musical work – apparently in the years 1802-5 (Reimer 1986:248). The close connection between both concepts is corroborated by the fact that two of the earliest surviving remarks about Spohr's novel performance style (both quoted above) referred specifically to his interpretations of classical quartets, which continued to form the bulk of his chamber-music repertoire for more than five decades (diary 11/9/1804 in Spohr 1968/I:74, *AMZ* 12/26/1804:204-5). The first of the two sources, a diary entry about a "music party" in 1804, is probably one of the earliest documents for the new custom to present one quartet by each of the three great Viennese composers in a single concert.

The fourth work on the same programme was a *quatuor brillant* of the violin virtuoso Pierre Rode, that is, a violin concerto with string-trio accompaniment. The juxtaposition of classical Viennese quartets and virtuosic French violin music seems eclectic to us but is, in fact, characteristic of Spohr's position between historical periods, styles, and between aesthetic concepts – a position Berrett (1974:3) and Göthel (1984:16) called "Janus-like" and which also manifested itself in the diverse elements of his compositional style (Wulfhorst 1995:515). Throughout his long performing career he showed as much enthusiasm when he played Beethoven's quartets, pinnacles of the 'second' culture (which he programmed initially against the resistance of prominent colleagues), as when he performed Rode's *quatuors brillants*, representatives of the 'first' culture. In his "music parties" there was a firm place not only for the classical quartet repertoire, which requires the performer "to bring the composer's idea to life", but also for "the *quatuor brillant* and similar virtuosic pieces", which he considered "concert music" and which, as he believed, gave "the solo player an opportunity to display his virtuosity in smaller circles" (Spohr [1833]:195, 247). True, Spohr made derogatory remarks about virtuosic "war horses" and "trifles" (1968/I:161, *AMZ* 2/28/1821:142). But one does not find in his thinking the "far-reaching rift in the concept of music" that Dahlhaus saw as the determining characteristic of nineteenth-century musical aesthetics (1989:8), nor an "aesthetic dichotomy" that Sponheuer found in the writings of Schumann, Brendel, or Hanslick (1980:3). For Spohr, two cultures coexisted side by side – the 'functional', virtuosic music, which centred on brilliant technical display and

the 'autonomous', classical art, which required the performer to serve the composer.

### "Correct Performance"

The belief in the value of the 'autonomous' work of art, associated with the 'second' culture, had important consequences for the performer, as described in the fundamental theory of performance in Spohr's *Violin Method* (Spohr [1833]:195-97, 246-49, translated in Stowell 1990:278-82). What Spohr defined as "correct performance" entailed a negative and a positive postulate: first, he did not allow the performer to add his own articulations, slurs, bowings, virtuosic fingerings (portamentos and finger exchanges on single notes), ornaments, and *rubati* (Spohr [1833]:246); second, he must execute faithfully all elements of the score – this included an increasing gamut of parameters in Spohr's scores.

Spohr demanded disciplined playing especially in the classical quartet repertoire and cautioned virtuosos against treating quartet parts with their usual licence:

...those types of bowings which are essential to a musical idea and which recur in the other parts, may not be changed arbitrarily, even if the player were able to substitute easier or more piquant ones. The quartet player must also be careful with adding other means of expression which are common in solo playing, since thus the ensemble might be easily disturbed and the composer's idea distorted. (Spohr [1833]:247)

At the age of eighteen he still considered the "tasteful" ornaments his teacher Franz Eck applied to a quartet

**FACSIMILE 1:** In his *Violin Method* (Vienna: Tobias Haslinger, [1833], pp. 195-196) Spohr designed a comprehensive theory of performance which comprised an objective component (the "correct performance") and a subjective component (the "beautiful performance").

## DRITTE ABTHEILUNG

### Vom Vortrage.

#### Erster Abschnitt.

#### Vom Vortrage überhaupt.

Vortrag heisst die Art und Weise, wie der Sanger oder Spieler das, was der Komponist ersann und niederschrieb, zu horen gibt. Beschrankt sich dies auf ein treues Wiedergeben dessen, was durch Noten, Zeichen und Kunstwortler vorgeschrieben ist, so nennt man es richtigen Vortrag; thut der Ausubende aber von dem Seinigen hinzu und vermag er das Vorgetragene geistig zu beleben, so dass vom Horer die Intensionen des Komponisten erkannt und mitempfinden werden konnen, so heisst dies schoner Vortrag, der dann Correkteit, Gefuhl und Eleganz in sich vereinigt.

Dem schonen Vortrage muss der richtige naturlich vorausgehen. Auf diesen bezieht sich daher auch grostentheils das, was in den vorigen Abschnitten gelehrt worden ist; doch enthalten sie auch schon alle die technischen Hulfsmittel, die zum schonen Vortrage erforderlich sind und es ist hier daher nur noch deren Anwendung auf diesen zu zeigen.

by Franz Krommer as legitimate, recommendable, and “ennobling” devices (diary 11/1802 in Spohr 1968/I:31). Thirty years later, however, he explained the reason for the successive limitation of such liberties:

In earlier times composers used to write down a melody in a very simple manner and leave the embellishments to the player or singer...Because musicians inevitably sought to outdo their predecessors and strove to add something new, there arose, however, ultimately such arbitrary habits and, as a result, such a lack of taste in embellishments that composers found it more advisable to write out the necessary embellishments themselves, at first in small notes, leaving their rhythm to the performer’s discretion, and later in large notes with precise indications of their rhythmic values. (Spohr [1833]:154).

Analogously, Spohr later reduced the excessive *rubati* and tempo changes for which he had received harsh criticism from Johann Friedrich Reichardt in the beginning of his career (*Berlinische musikalische Zeitung* I/1805:95-96 in Ederer 1984:71). Though Spohr recommended in his Violin Method “pushing the tempo in fiery and impetuous, passionate passages and holding it back in passages with tender or melancholy and sad character”, he seems to have renounced the exaggerated use of such liberties long before (Spohr [1833]:196, *AMZ* 11/4/1807:91).

Spohr’s growing aversion to excessive interpretive liberties also manifested itself in the more and more frequent complaints in his diaries, letters, and articles about players and conductors who ignored the composer’s tempo markings, dynamic signs, and phrase markings.

“Correct performance” entailed not only the limitation of the performer’s liberties but also “the faithful rendition of everything indicated by means of notes, symbols, and technical terms” (Spohr [1833]:195). This comprised – in addition to correct intonation, exact rhythm, and precise tempo – “following closely the indicated nuances of loud and soft and of the strokes, slurs, turns, trills etc.” (Spohr [1833]:195) – something not at all to be taken for granted in the early nineteenth century.

**FACSIMILE 2:** In the first edition of the Potpourri for Violin and Piano Op. 42 (Leipzig: Peters, 1817) Spohr indicated for the first time precise tempos by means of dual markings, referring to Mälzel’s metronome and J.G. Weber’s pendulum.



**FACSIMILE 3:** In the first edition of the String Quartet Op. 152 (Leipzig: Siegel, 1856) Spohr specified aspects of the performance which had formerly been left to the performer: dynamic details, fingerings, bowings, and vibrato.



In the scores and parts of his own works Spohr strove with time to eliminate more and more elements of composition from the performer's discretion and to indicate them as precisely as possible. Even his early published concertos and chamber music works included far more detailed and precise ornamentation, dynamics, and articulation than customary in his age, and the bowings and fingerings formed an integral part of the composition. This tendency struck his contemporaries as quite unusual, as a remark in Rochlitz's review of the Violin Concerto Op. 10 and the *Quatuor brillant* Op. 11 corroborates:

...the manner of fingering, which is peculiar to the author, is indicated very precisely throughout the entire obligato-violin part, as are the bowings...one receives the strong feeling that without the application of the indicated fingerings and strokes everything to be rendered loses, as it were, its physiognomy and becomes an undefined, vague phantom. (*AMZ* 12/21/1808:185)

Spohr was one of the first prominent composers to use precise tempo markings in his published scores – both numbers for Mälzel's metronome (*M.M.*) and numbers in Rhenish inches (*Rh.* or *Rhein.*), which referred to the length of the string pendulum invented by the theorist Jacob Gottfried Weber. In 1821 Spohr demanded “that the indication of tempos in Mälzel's or Weber's manner (or, best, in both manners) should finally become standard” (*AMZ* 3/7/1821:162) – something he had done apparently for the first time four years earlier in the first edition of his Potpourri Op. 42. Later he began to indicate even more subtle interpretive nuances in his published works, such as the bow direction (*tiré* for down-bow and *poussé* for upbow) and the use and speed of the vibrato (indicated by a wavy line with varying curve density).

### “Beautiful Performance”: Letter and “Spirit” of the Composition

As significant as the described steps towards an ‘objective’, faithful rendition of the score may be, Spohr went far beyond this dimension of the performance. In his memoirs he described his “efforts to render each composition in its appropriate style” and his attempts to tailor his “performance style closely to each individual composition” (Spohr 1968/I:104 and 132). His interpretation was by no means limited to a slavish realisation of the letter of the score but rather aimed at grasping the “spirit”, “character”, “style”, or “idea” of each composition, to “bring it to life”, “to imbue it with spiritual life”, and “to let the listener share in it” (*AMZ* 12/26/1804:202, Spohr [1833]:195, 246, 247).

“Penetrating into the idea of the composition” – something Spohr required especially in the classical quartet repertoire – meant that the performer must give up and “renounce” his individuality. This was postulated both in the above-quoted anonymous article about the quartet (*AMZ* 5/16/1810:521) and by Spohr himself: “Because the performance style must always result from the idea and the spirit of the composition, the soloist, when playing quartets, must renounce his individual soloistic performance style and adapt it to the individual character of the quartet” (Spohr [1833], 246). The “technical devices” Spohr recommended for this type of performance included dynamic and timbral nuances (“the more refined nuances of bowing”), sophisticated fingerings, differentiation of the vibrato speed, and, as mentioned above, *rubati* (Spohr [1833]:195-96). The result is a more evolved form of performance which transcends mere “correctness”:

...if the performer adds to the performance and is able to imbue the piece he plays with spiritual life so that the listener can recognise and feel the composer's intentions, this is called a *beautiful performance*, which thus unites correctness, feeling, and elegance...what transforms the *correct* into the *beautiful* performance [is] the ability to recognise the character of the piece of music to be performed and to sense and render its prevailing expression... (Spohr [1833]:246)

### Historical Performance Versus Subjective Interpretation

The final and perhaps most surprising and forward-looking aspect of Spohr's theory of performance is the emphasis he gave to its historical dimension. He differentiated not only between the styles of “the most diverse compositions” and composers (*AMZ* 12/26/1804:202) but also between the styles of various periods. This is suggested by a remark reported by Alexander Malibran, who studied with him from 1845 to 1848:

[Spohr] was horrified when he noticed that violinists executed *détaché* strokes with bouncing bow – even in the works of the oldest masters [Corelli, Pugnani, Tartini (Spohr [1833]:108)], which, more than any others, require a free, well-nourished tone. He would not allow one to play all

composers in the same style. On the contrary, he wanted the artist to adhere to true tradition, to renounce himself, so-to-speak, and to perform the composer in his own style. He remarked: “One considers neither the style of the composer nor the instrument, which was entirely different at the time of the composition than now. One portrays Frederick the Great [1712-86] with the hair style *à la Titus*, in a cloak, and in black pants [*i.e.*, in the fashion of the era after the French Revolution].” (Malibran 1860:207-8)

Spohr’s criticism of anachronistic playing styles represents probably one of the earliest documents for what Danuser calls the “historical, reconstructive manner of performance” (1992:13) and, indirectly, one of the earliest pleas for the use of ‘historical’ instruments. At the same time, though, Spohr’s remarks point to the relativity of the ‘objective’, ‘authentic’, or historical component of performance (the “true tradition”) and the priority of the subjective component. For, if he rejected the *spiccato* as an allegedly anachronistic device for the violin music of the Italian baroque and if he demanded instead a “well-nourished” *détaché* stroke, this view constituted a misinterpretation of historical facts, motivated by his own aesthetic convictions. After all, the baroque violin bow was lighter than Spohr’s Tourte-bow, tended by nature towards a half-bouncing stroke, and did not lend itself well to a solid *alla-corda* stroke. Thus, the basis for Spohr’s theory of historically appropriate bowings was not the “true tradition” but rather a subjective interpretation of the ‘spirit’ of baroque violin music – an interpretation from the aesthetic perspective of an early-romantic musician and a representative of Rode’s bowing technique. In contrast to the lighter, more graceful style of the preclassical and classical periods, the violin music of the baroque seemed to him to show a closer affinity to the violin music of the Parisian school and to his own ideal of a “free, well-nourished tone” inspired by it.

Though Spohr, ahead of his time, promoted the performer’s “self-denial” and though he strove to subordinate his performance to the composer’s intentions and thus to base it on an ‘objective’, historical foundation, he truly gave priority to the player’s subjective sensitivity: the “beautiful performance” stood above the “correct” one. He considered “easily excitable feeling” an indispensable quality for a “perfect quartet performance” and at least as important as “educated taste”, that is, awareness of aesthetic traditions and conventions, and as “knowledge of composition” (Spohr [1833]:246).

An example will demonstrate the relative significance of the objective and subjective components for Spohr’s interpretive decisions. In the diary of his Italian journey, he complained that a Milanese conductor took the final fugue in Haydn’s *Seasons* too fast, “which caused it to lose some of its dignity” (diary 9/19/1816 in Spohr 1968/I:250). Granted this criticism was founded on Spohr’s objective, historical, and stylistic knowledge – on his awareness of the “dignity” of counterpoint. But ultimately his perception of the “dignified” spirit of the composition, that is, his “easily excitable feeling” and his subjective perception were the decisive factors for his interpretation and formed the guideline for the tempo. Thus, behind his judgment stood a clear belief to the subjectivity of performance, which led him to preface his essay on interpretation with the following statement: “what transforms the *correct* into the *beautiful* performance...is an inborn gift of nature, which can be awakened and strengthened but cannot be taught” (Spohr [1833]:246).

### Towards a New Performance Culture

Spohr’s redefinition of performing as serving the composer marked the beginning of a long evolution, the next stages of which were shaped by prominent romantic musicians. Among violinists, Joseph Joachim, an admirer of Spohr and a student of his pupil Ferdinand David, was one of the first to play Bach’s Solo Sonatas without the common contemporary piano accompaniment, and he became a classical, strict interpreter of the Viennese quartet repertoire and a pioneer performer of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, which was ignored by violin virtuosos. Among pianists, the “primarily composition-orientated tradition” began with Sigismund Thalberg, Clara Schumann, Robert Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn, and Hans von Bülow (Danuser 1992:397). Although the development of this interpretive tradition from the early nineteenth century to the present day still requires scrutiny, one may already say with certainty that its early history was strongly shaped by Louis Spohr. Through his influence on his more than two hundred students and on countless musicians who came in contact with him during his long career, he helped spread his enthusiasm

for realising the “spirit” of each composition.

It is only to be hoped that Spohr’s maxim to respect the letter of a score but, above all, “to penetrate into the composer’s idea and to bring it to life” will be taken seriously again (Spohr [1833]:246). One also hopes that performances of this kind will benefit not only the Viennese classical repertoire which Spohr used to develop the novel concept but also his own music, the lyrical yet powerful character of which he highlighted with his expressive, fiery playing. This would be an important achievement for the Spohr Revival at the end of the twentieth century and, at the same time, a significant step towards a new culture of musical performance.

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