

Tafelmusik

CHOPIN ON PERIOD PIANO with Janina Fialkowska

PROGRAMME NOTES

by Allen Whear

The music-hall singer attends a series
Of masses and fugues and “ops”
By Bach, interwoven
With Spohr and Beethoven,
At classical Monday Pops.

from The Mikado by Gilbert and Sullivan

It would come as no surprise at all to Louis Spohr to be referred to in the same breath as Bach and Beethoven. What would astonish and disappoint him is the degree to which his massive output of operas, symphonies and chamber music has been forgotten today.



Spohr is one of the most important, if underappreciated figures in music history. His long life spanned the careers of Mozart and Wagner and he was considered the greatest composer in Germany between the death of Beethoven and the ascendancy of Mendelssohn. As a violin virtuoso he was Germany's answer to Paganini, and as a composer he wrote prolifically in all the important genres of the day, and even invented a few new ones. He conducted important first or early performances of works by Beethoven and Wagner. He enjoyed universal acclaim during his lifetime and was highly respected by contemporaries such as Weber, Schumann and Mendelssohn. His practical contributions include the introduction of the baton for conducting, the invention of the violin chinrest, and the inclusion of rehearsal cues (“let's start at letter B”) in orchestral parts. He also published a highly influential *Violinschule*. While the majority of Spohr's works are neglected, certain pieces, such as this Nonet, have stayed in the repertoire not just because of the novelty of their instrumentation but also because of their inherent quality, and have thus preserved Spohr's place in the musical firmament.

In 1813, Spohr was appointed leader of the orchestra of the Theater an der Wien in Vienna. During his three years there he developed a cordial relationship with Beethoven, whose early quartets he championed, but of whose late style he was famously critical, deeming the finale of the Ninth Symphony “monstrous and tasteless.” While in Vienna, Spohr was approached by a wealthy cloth merchant and former patron of Haydn and Mozart named Johann Tost with an unusual commission. For a generous fee, Tost would have exclusive rights to all the chamber music written in the next few years, and would have to be present at all performances, public and private, of these works. Spohr already had several string quartets available for this agreement, but, as he later wrote:

I thought of my obligations to Tost, and asked him what he would like. He thought for a moment and decided for a nonet, made up of four strings plus flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon, to be written in such a way that each instrument would appear in its true character. I was much attracted by the difficulty of the assignment and went right to work. This was the

origin of the famous Nonet, which remains to this day the only work of its kind. It was played at one of the first musicales of the new season and aroused such enthusiasm that it was repeated frequently in the course of that same season. Tost appeared each time with the score and parts under his arm, set them out on the music stands himself and gathered them up after the performance. He was as pleased by the applause as if he himself had been the composer.

Spohr fully embraced the concertante principal in this work, meaning all of the instruments – not just the violin – participate in the thematic development, with flashes of virtuosity. The first four notes of the piece form a motive which appears in various guises throughout the work: as a fugato in the development of the first movement, in the opening melody of the slow movement, in the second theme of the last movement, etc. This use of a unifying, almost cyclical theme is a technique that Beethoven and Haydn would have appreciated. The *Scherzo* shows many original touches, including the use of two trios: the first features the strings and shows the influence of the Viennese ballroom; the second, for the winds, develops a chromatic motive borrowed from Mozart’s “Jupiter” Symphony. The *Scherzo*’s enigmatic ending sets the stage for the lyrical *Adagio*. The high-spirited *Finale* has a jaunty second theme that curiously foreshadows Gilbert and Sullivan.

He [Chopin] is indeed the boldest and proudest poetic spirit of the time.

Robert Schumann

The years 1809–1811 saw the births of four musicians destined to have a profound impact on the development of music in the 19th century: Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, and Liszt. Each began their musical orientation as a pianist, and as time passed were well aware of and influenced by each other. Each contributed to musical developments of the romantic era in unique ways. Of the four, Fryderyk Chopin is the most inextricably associated with the piano. His playing, teaching, and above all his compositions changed forever the expressive possibilities of his chosen instrument. With these concerts, Tafelmusik joins in the international celebration of Chopin’s bicentennial by performing his music for the first time.

During the first half of the 19th century, travelling virtuosos performed music mostly of their own creation. At the time Chopin began launching his career, the leading pianists – and thus the most frequently heard concertos – included the likes of Kalkbrenner (to whom Chopin’s E-Minor Piano Concerto is dedicated), Moscheles, John Field and Hummel. Each of these had their influence on Chopin, as did classical models such as Mozart. Chopin completed two piano concertos of his own by the age of 20. The Concerto no. 1 in E Minor was actually the second to be composed and was first publicly performed by Chopin at the National Theatre in Warsaw in October, 1830.



*Portrait of Chopin by
Eugène Delacroix, c. 1838*

Soon after this premiere, Chopin set out on a concert tour, visiting Vienna, among many other capitals. Political turmoil in Poland resulted in his never returning to his homeland, settling instead in Paris for the rest of his life. There he circulated within the highest social and intellectual echelons. His teaching was in high demand among the aristocracy and he enjoyed close friendships with the painter Delacroix, the cellist Franchomme, and of course the novelist George Sand. Despite this lofty company, Chopin remained proud of his Polish heritage and found many ways to express this in his music.

Chopin performed frequently in the opulent salons of the city while largely avoiding the public concert halls (his ill health made touring like Paganini or Liszt out of the question). Although such intimate venues were not conducive to the employment of large orchestras, he continued to perform some of his early concerted works in the salons, albeit with reduced accompaniments. Chopin took part in a concert in Rouen on March 12, 1838 in which the E-Minor

Concerto was performed despite the unavailability of the local orchestra. That evening's programme also included Spohr's Nonet, implying that a viable performance of Chopin's concerto must have taken place with but a handful of instruments. With this in mind, Janina Fialkowska commissioned Dutch composer/arranger Sylvia Maessen to create a version of Chopin's concertos – originally scored for double woodwinds, full brass and strings – utilizing a chamber music instrumentation.

The first movement, *Allegro maestoso*, is the most traditional in terms of formal design, but has certain unusual touches. In the exposition, the second theme is in the tonic major (E Major – a “suicidal” plan, according to musicologist Donald Tovey) and there are other harmonic surprises, including diversions into C Major. The solo piano is largely responsible for the development section with highly decorative passages, but without the vacuous pyrotechnical display often found in piano concertos of the time. Since the classical piano concerto had been experiencing a slump in favor of brilliant showpieces, Schumann notably remarked that in his concertos, Chopin “introduces the spirit of Beethoven into the concert hall.” In the *Romance*, said to be influenced by the *bel canto* style of Bellini, the piano is allowed the intimacy of the nascent nocturne, free to indulge in rich figurations and explorations of tone colors while the strings provide a velvety framework. In a letter to a friend, Chopin described this movement as “intended to convey the impression one receives when the eye rests on a beloved landscape, which calls up in one's soul beautiful memories – for instance, on a fine moonlit night in spring.” The *Rondo Finale* draws on the character of Polish folk music with a principal theme whose foot-stomping, syncopated rhythm resembles that from a dance called a *krakowiak*. To quote Robert Schumann on Chopin one last time: “Hats off, gentlemen – a genius!”