

## **MUSIC ON THE VERGE OF TWO CENTURIES**

Do the millennium celebrations also mark the beginning of a new era? Obviously not! At the same time, however, it will always be tempting to approach history by way of round figures. The historian Jan Romein in, whose book formed the inspiration for the heading above, showed how fundamental and all-pervasive the change-over from the nineteenth to the twentieth century really was. Nobody in their right mind will claim that all these changes came about exactly in the year 1900. There is even a lot to be said for having the twentieth century begin with the fatal shooting in Sarajevo in 1914, rather than 1900 or 1901. Still, no matter what the situation was really like at the time, it cannot be denied that the year "1900" has a magical ring to it. Chances are that future historians, too, will look back on the twentieth century as an era and use an entirely different date to mark the end of the century than the year 2000. They may well recognise the year 1989 as the turning point, which is the year during which the Berlin wall came down. As a result, the century which we are about to leave behind us would become one of the shortest centuries ever. Whatever the case may be, though, the excitement surrounding the year 2000 will not be any less.

In other words, history may well prove us wrong. At the same time, however, it is remarkable to see how often nice and round figures have played a key role and have been used as pivoting points for major historical events. Take, for example, the year 750 BC, or the years 500AD, or 1500 AD. The change-over from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century definitely falls into the same category. After all, the year 1800 marks the beginning of an era that can be described by means of a few key words only: a growing influence of the middle classes, the beginning and development of an industrial society and the rise of democracy. From a cultural point of view, too, the changes were nothing less than fundamental. In music, for example, the development from Classicism to the early Romanticism was beginning to take place. The two pieces on this CD symbolise the said change. Mozart's KV 452, which dates back to 1784, completely fits within the Vienna tradition of Classicism; Spohr's opus 52 from 1820, on the other hand, is beginning to show elements of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Although the two pieces of music have much in common, they obviously belong to two entirely different traditions, which is shown by even a small detail such as opus-numbering.

*Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Quintet in E-flat for piano, oboe, clarinet, French horn and bassoon.*

Whoever listens carefully to the ways in which Mozart used the orchestra, for example in his symphonies and operas, will not fail to detect in them a special preference for the characteristic sound of wind instruments. It is this special interest that has led Mozart to produce some of the most beautiful solo-concertos for bassoon, flute, oboe, French horn and clarinet. In addition, like many other composers of his time, he also produced music for wind and percussion instruments, as well as highly entertaining divertimenti and serenades for wind instruments, ranging in strength from three to thirteen instruments. Mozart's fascination with the colour and infinite mixing possibilities of especially the woodwinds shows particularly clearly in the piano concertos from his early years in Vienna. Part of the charm of the said concertos is the result of the beautiful mixture of colours of piano and occasional solo parts for wind instruments.

With the above-mentioned piano concertos in mind, it is no surprise to find that Mozart, in the same period, composed a piece for piano and four wind instruments. Nowadays, a combination such as this will not strike anybody as unusual, but for that particular time, it was highly uncommon. After all, previously, the piano always used to be combined with strings and sometimes even with occasional solo parts for wind instruments, but to especially create an ensemble for one piano and four wind instruments was unheard-of. The composition was made at the end of the 1783/84 season, which was a very productive period for Mozart, who had already given a number of concerts on subscription earlier that year. Given the enormous success, he was planning another concert in the Vienna Burgtheatre for

the middle of march 1784. As some of the works which were to be performed had not been completed, the concert was postponed until 1 April . And this became the date on which, together with the piano concertos KV 450 and 451, the quintet KV 452 was to be performed for the first time ever. In a letter to his father, dated 10 April, the composer gave his impression of the premieres. He wrote: "I had composed two separate concertos and a quintet, which received tremendous applause. If you ask me, this is definitely the best work I have ever written. How I would have loved for you to be there and hear for yourself what I have made, not in the least because it was played so beautifully! Quite frankly, I was exhausted after so many performances, but I feel honoured that the audience did not tire of my music." It seems remarkable that Mozart, who in 1784 had already produced a fair number of absolute masterpieces, should refer to KV 452 as the best he had ever written. By listening to this sparkling quintet, which, no doubt, gave the musicians just as much pleasure in performing it as it did the audience that April day in 1784, Mozart's satisfaction with the piece becomes much more understandable. The quintet was written in E-flat, which is the key Beethoven decided to use as well when he wrote a very similar piece of music some time later. Mozart's quintet opens with a slow introduction, whereby the piano is set off against the musical cords of the wind instruments. One by one and starting with the horn, the wind instruments gradually separate themselves from the ensemble. The tension is built up, slowly but surely, to prepare for the transition to the allegro. Within the allegro, it is the interaction between the five instruments that is particularly striking. Short themes present themselves, sometimes in the form of questions and answers. And just like the piano concertos mentioned before, the development conjures up associations with Mozart's operas. Much more than in the first part, however, does this kinship with opera show in the long, lyrical phrases of the Larghetto which all limes are beautifully adorned by the most exquisite trills. After this, the wonderfully flowing movements of the middle part are followed by a rondo, characteristically set in the Mozart fashion. Before the coda, finally, Mozart placed a well-structured cadence for all five instruments, thereby enhancing the idea of spontaneity even more.

*Ludwig Spohr.- Quintet in c opus 52 for piano,flute, clarinet, French horn and bassoon*

Even before the eighteenth century came to an end, Mozart's example was followed. It was Beethoven's opus 16, composed in 1796, that was modelled after the KV 452. Another quarter-century later, the number of pieces for piano and wind instruments increased by yet another quintet, the third one, which was written by Spohr.

Ludwig Spohr was one of the best-loved musicians of his age. Not only did he meet with much acclaim as a violinist and conductor, he was also regarded as one of the greatest composers of his time. In the nineteenth century, his name was even bracketed together with those of Beethoven and Mendelssohn. And yet, even though the importance of Spohr's compositions may have been overrated during the nineteenth century, the balance, unfortunately enough, struck to the other side during the twentieth, as is often the case when extremist views are corrected later on. During the twentieth century, Spohr's music was described as old-fashioned and rather dull. Recently, however, there seems to have been renewed interest in his music because of its high degree of professionalism and rather catchy sounds. A large number of Spohr's compositions, take for instance the fifteen violin concertos, owe their existence to the dual nature of Spohr's professional expertise, that of composer and performing musician. Not only did he write music for himself, but also for his wife Dorette, who was a well-known and much-acclaimed harpist. The quintet opus 52 was created as a result of a tragic turn in her career, described in detail in Spohr's memoirs: "This was the beginning of a sad period in my life. By exerting herself too much whilst playing her new harp, and as a result of her mixed feelings with regard to her latest concert, Dorette felt so exhausted and ill that I feared she might fall victim to another nervous breakdown, the third in succession. It was high time, therefore, that we took a dramatic decision with regard to her future." This decision entailed that Dorette would have to be convinced to give up "her

nerve-wrecking' instrument" and take up the piano once again, an instrument she had played quite well during her younger years. In order to rekindle her love for the piano, it was in great haste that Spohr began to write his quintet, the first performance of which was to be given by Dorette. Even before he left for London in 1820 to go on a concert trip, the first part had been put to paper. In London, he continued working on what he himself was to refer to as a "Piano forte quintet, accompanied by solo influences of the wind instruments".

In a number of ways, Spohr turned away from the model previously used by Mozart and Beethoven. Unlike the two earlier quintets, opus 52 consists of four parts, rather than three. In addition, the oboe was replaced by the flute. What the 1820 composition shares with Mozart's music is that it is pure chamber music, with a piano part that might well be described as utterly virtuoso and yet does not make the impression of being a solo part, as was the case with Beethoven. Just like the KV 452, Spohr's opus has a very strong opening scene, during which the five instruments start to play the main theme straightaway. Immediately following, there is a brilliant allegro which, in terms of style, sometimes reminds us of Hummel. At times, the piano will play some solo parts against a background of wind instruments, only to be given a more supporting role later on. For more than ten minutes, Spohr manages to keep up the pace and render a strong sense of vitality to the whole. Here, too, the climax is the very colourful and highly attractive slow part, so reminiscent of a nocturne. What is different from the examples set by Mozart and Beethoven is that, before the grand finale, there is room for a minuet. Because of the name, if not the very nature of its music, this particular part reminds us of the eighteenth century. It sounds like the precursor of the gracious and thoughtful scherzi used by Brahms in his symphonies. But the piece contains yet another classical trio which, oddly enough, has been allocated to the piano almost entirely. The lively finale convincingly rounds off this unique and perfect piece of chamber music.

As Spohr had hoped, Dorette immediately began to study the music and "within just a few weeks, she actually managed to play this difficult piece both to her own and to my satisfaction". It was with this work, among others, that the couple took off on a musical tour and during the course of the years 1820 and 1821, it was performed many different times. In Paris, they made an enormous impression with it on Cherubini. And, after having heard the piece as well, even Moscheles, who was a well-known composer and much-acclaimed pianist of his time, gave his own interpretation of it in Paris, together with members of the renowned Reicha quintet. Without wanting to sell his wife short, Spohr had to admit that this was indeed the most magnificent performance he had ever heard of the piece, due to Moscheles' energetic approach and the bravery with which he performed his music. After Mrs Spohr and Moscheles, other musicians were to follow suit and include the quintet in their repertoire. None other than Chopin found the piece charming, albeit tricky at times. After the age of the nineteenth-century virtuosos, Spohr's music became forgotten. And it was not until recently that the quality of a piece like opus 52 was suddenly appreciated once more by musical companies such as the Hexagon Ensemble.

*Niek Nelissen*