

JOACHIM RAFF

Cantata: *Die Sterne* (The Stars)

WoO.53

There is very little known today about the origins of the cantata "*Die Sterne*" (The Stars) by Joachim Raff. In his catalogue of Raff's works, Albert Schaefer simply states: "composed in the summer and fall of 1880 in Frankfurt-am-Main." Even Raff's daughter Helene, biographer of her father and co-author of the cantata, has little to say about this work: "Other works composed in 1880 and 1881 include the cantata "*Die Sterne*" for chorus and orchestra, as well as the comic opera "*Die Eifersüchtigen*" (The Jealous Ones) and two characteristic pieces for piano with the title "*Von der schwäbischen Alb*" (From the Swabian Jura) - a farewell greeting from Raff to his never forgotten fatherland. The texts to the cantata "*Die Sterne*", the song cycle "*Blondel de Nesle*" and "*Die Tageszeiten*" (The Times of Day) were written by Helge Heldt; the person hiding behind this pseudonym was the composer's young daughter. Her father had set her the task of writing the poems for him; of course, his demands were met, but with a very bad conscience on the part of the unwilling poetess because she considered it almost a sin against the Holy Ghost of poetry to turn set thoughts into rhyming verse when she felt no real inner compulsion to do so." In her later autobiography Helene Raff does not mention "*Die Sterne*" once, referring only to "*Die Tageszeiten*" and "*Blondel de Nesle*" and closing her recollections with: "fortunately the verses appeared under a pseudonym. Even at that age I began to realise that I was no good at poetry." In retrospect it seems that the verses of the young authoress were rather embarrassing to her. But what may have motivated her father to commission from his daughter the text, with his content guidelines? It should be remembered that in the last years of his life Raff employed materials from his many faceted encyclopaedic knowledge for musical transformation; for example, from the *Nibelungenlied* ("Volker", Op.203), from the dramas of Shakespeare ("Four Shakespeare Overtures, WoO 49-52), concerning the apocalyptic Gospel of St. John ("World's End - Judgment - New World", Op.212), from the world of the 18th century ("Benedetto Marcello", WoO 46), about John the Baptist (a planned but never executed oratorio project), and the crusades (the song cycle "*Blondel de Nesle*" Op.211). A further feature of this all-encompassing catalogue is dedicated to the everyday experiences of man: the seasons (a symphony cycle), the times of day (Concertante, Op. 209), water (a never realized oratorio project), and life and death (*Totentanz*, Op.181, the Sixth Symphony, Op.189, and Two Songs, Op. 186). Within this rubric falls the present cantata "*Die Sterne*", WoO 53. It is notable for the numerous passages with astrological associations, combined with a pious and astonishingly natural description of a starry sky. At the time of the cantata's creation this was an anachronism. Astrology has ceased to have any real influence on society since its apogee in the 16th century, primarily because of discoveries in the natural

sciences such as the Newtonian explanation for the movement of planets according to the laws of gravity. In an encyclopaedia of Raff's time one reads: "Astrology, or the art of interpreting the stars, is the deceptive art of predicting specific developments from the position of stars, especially regarding the fate of men. It belongs to the oldest types of superstition and is referred to even in the book of Moses...The Copernican system delivered the *coup-de-grâce* to astrology. Nevertheless this didn't prevent attempts at maintaining it, in particular Bapt. Morni (+1583 +1656), whose "*Astrologia Gallica*" - the fruit of 30 years of work - exhibits great effort to do so; but astrology went to the grave with him. Its invalidity is today generally recognized among Christian populations. Nevertheless in the 19th century it found an adherent in the writer J.M. Pfaff, but his writings "*Astrologie*" (Astrology) and "*Der Stein der Weisen*" (The Stone of the Wise) have passed on without note."

That we constantly come across musical and contextual anachronisms from Raff is no surprise for those who know his works. In many respects Raff was not a man of his times, preferring to take up something from the past and ignore contemporary trends; it was only after his death that those archaic ideas re-emerged generally and became current. He seems to have found nothing suitable in the literature known to him at the time for his vision of "*Die Sterne*" and so he had his daughter provide the rhyme schemes for his musical inspiration. At other times Raff himself took up the pen and rhymed under the pseudonym Arnold Börner. Even if the verses were second rate, the "thoughts" were, more importantly, ennobled through the music. Yet even in this, Raff's attitude toward his text settings seems to have evolved from an earlier period.

Raff diverges from his depiction of nature and astrology and turns to a confessional, faith-encompassing idea of an ultimately all-powerful "higher power". This general religious reference parallels Raff's life, in which his religious belief was strengthened with increasing age as witnessed by his meaningful selection of material. Generally however, Raff's attitude towards religion is rather contradictory. After his schooling, in which he was educated partially by the Jesuits, Raff seemed little interested in religion until well into the 1860s. Despite the biblical source, he wrote his "Samson" as a thoroughly human-political drama, in which all reference to metaphysics was denied and the concept of "God" doesn't appear even once. With the birth of his daughter Helene, Raff's interest in religion began to grow, even if not in a dogmatic or committed way. Helene Raff characterizes him as "philosophically open but never abandoning his inherited Catholicism." Crises in life then brought a turn toward religion. In his biography we read: "The young wife (Doris Raff) found herself expecting a child and yet took it upon herself to put up the curtains which she had just washed. Unfortunately, she paid the price for all that careless clambering and stretching and lost her child: she lay on the floor in terrible pain while Raff wandered around completely panic-stricken, shouting from the depths of his soul: "God, oh God, don't take my wife from me!" At this his wife roused

herself sufficiently to stammer feebly these words of reassurance: “I’m not dying - just calm down; I’m not dying at all.” Later Raff told his wife that, if the worst thing had befallen him and he had lost her, he would never have married again, but would have sought to join a religious order.” In a later passage we read: “At this time Raff was often to be found in a melancholy mood, thinking anxiously about the future. On one occasion he spoke in an almost child-like manner of his hopes of heaven; on another he impressed upon his daughter the need to believe in God always and to be aware of his omnipresence. However, he didn’t make any specific decisions concerning the possibility of his own death. In previous years he had told his wife that he wanted to die alone so as to observe in peace and quiet the great mystery of the separation of body and soul. In the meantime the desire had stirred within him to receive the last rites before he died. However, he never returned to either notion.” In the “higher power” of “*Die Sterne*” there seems to have been developed a type of compromise formula which neither excludes nor confirms and which his wife Doris, whom Helene Raff characterizes as indifferent to religion and a confirmed materialist, was certainly able to tolerate.

Musically Raff enjoys to the full the orchestral tone painting of *Sternbilder* (Constellations, parts I and II), *Kometen* (Comets, part III) and *Sternschnuppen* (Shooting Stars, part IV), wherein the chorus intones Helene’s verses with a mostly homophonic texture. For Raff his rather unusual simplicity here may have arisen from his wish to allow maximum understanding of the texts. In the final movement Raff occasionally employs the old form of a choral fugue, which the quasi-religious connections of this section strengthen still further by its reference to oratorio formulae. At the movement’s climax there appears at the end of the fugue a strong chorale-like statement “*frommer Glaube trüget nicht*” (“pious faith does not deceive”) which is so emphatically introduced that one has the feeling that the composer wanted to sweep away any doubt about the value of religious thought. Yet the musician retains the last word and provides the piece with a compelling conclusion through a brilliant *stretta*.

Volker Tosta - Stuttgart, 2010

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