

# Concert Review

## Hagen, Germany: Tuesday 18 May 2010

### by Alan H. Krueck

Dr Alan Krueck died on 24 June 2010, just over a month after attending this concert.

On May 18, 2010 the *Philharmonisches Orchester* (Philharmonic Orchestra of) Hagen presented the ninth concert of its 2009-2010 season with a program theme of *Der Wald* (The Forest). Three works related to a forest theme made up the program: the Overture to the opera *Oberon* by Carl Maria von Weber, the local premiere of the Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra of 1995, "The Five Sacred Trees" by John Williams and the Symphony No. 3 in F major, Op. 153, *Im Walde* (In the Forest) by Joachim Raff. The youngish Austrian conductor Andreas Stoehr was at the helm and the bassoon soloist was Henrik Rabien. The concert was held in the Stadthalle Hagen, a huge complex used for many events and constructed onto a large hill. Acoustically fine, it reflected the sound of the orchestra more than satisfactorily for the evening's reasonably large crowd. Anyone unacquainted with the layout of Hagen is well advised to use a taxi to reach the hall which is distant from the center of the city. While the orchestra is also engaged for the Hagen opera, its concerts are not given in the opera house (located in the city's center).

The opening work, the *Oberon* Overture of von Weber, was played with reasonable panache, with Stoehr emphasizing contrasts in dynamics and tempi which didn't jolt the listener and allowed the music to take a normal and pleasing course. The performers seemed to enjoy their work, but it was fairly easy to estimate that rehearsal time had not been lavishly expended – an observation indirectly verified by the conductor in a conversation with this writer after the concert. A more than common appreciation for the performance was apparent in the extended applause at its conclusion.

Though John Williams has made his fame primarily through exceptionally effective film music, he has steadily composed in more serious standard forms throughout his career. His "classical" output is substantial and encompasses a good number of concerti for the instruments of the orchestra, ranging from flute to tuba. His Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra carries the title "The Five Sacred Trees" and requires knowledge of the fact that it refers to sacred legends associated with specific trees in Irish culture. The first movement is entitled *Eó Mugna* (Oak), the remaining four in order: *Tortan* (Ash), *Eó Rosso* (Yew tree), *Craeb Uisnig* (Ash) and *Dathi* (Ash). Each has a specific legend attached to it, which refers to a respective movement's character and lends the concerto a basically narrative nature – program music, if you will. The concerto begins with an elaborate bassoon solo and with the orchestra joining, a lovely lyrical enterprise ensues revealing aspects that *Eó Mugna's* roots are deep and are nurtured by the basis of all wisdom: rising to a resplendent climax, the movement ends in relaxation. The following movement, *Tortan*, is a scherzo and – for this listener – the gem of the concerto: *Tortan* is connected to witches and understandably witches dances: out comes a solo violin to fiddle with the bassoon in an utterly delightful interplay featuring a slap-happy configuration of Paganini's 24th Caprice with the more staid invention of the bassoon line, both wonderfully abetted by Williams' endlessly inventive percussion writing (including some humorous usage of string *pizzicatti*) and a brief visitation from *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* at the end. *Eó Rosso* is a lyrical slow movement: this tree, while symbolizing death and destruction, is also representative of a mother's goodness and Williams supplies a fine respite from the preceding movement. *Craeb Uisnig* is described by author Robert Graves as a source of treachery and the movement is essentially a shadowy second scherzo. Ostensibly Williams made some attempt to use a Keltic tree script supposedly related to the 20 string Irish harp to invoke Keltic spirit in the music of the final movement *Dathi*, the tree which hovers over poets and which is supposed to be the last tree which will ever fall. The idea of Druids is exposed by the aforementioned use of the "tree script" and after a prolonged climax the music gradually subdues in lyrical gradation

until the bassoon recalls material of the concerto's opening and ends the work quietly and alone. While the concerto is a fine and enjoyable piece, the ending does not inspire spontaneous and boisterous applause, so it is all the more satisfying to report that the soloist Henrik Rabien was richly rewarded for his magnificent delivery of the solo part – extended calls to the stage for the visibly exhausted bassoonist both solo and along with the obviously quite pleased conductor who used each opportunity to point to orchestra players with important solos within the work, raising the orchestra to its feet several times. It was quite clear that a great deal of rehearsal had gone into the concerto and the orchestra had dealt handsomely throughout with the intricacies of Williams' inventive scoring.

The *raison d'être* for this writer's attendance at this concert was the concluding work on the program: Joachim Raff's Third Symphony, *Im Walde*. As an undergraduate at Syracuse University in the late 1950s he had had the good fortune of meeting an older student who had just finished service duty in Germany. Not a devoted classical listener, the ex-army private nevertheless had made reel-to-reel tapes while in Germany of pieces which struck his fancy. Inquiring about the repertoire he taped – mostly standard in consideration and otherwise pop music – he mentioned he had a work called "In the Forest" by Joachim Raff and had recorded it from the US Armed Forces Network: it was the legendary Bernard Herrmann CBS/Symphony performance of *Im Walde* from 1950. Since that time in 1958 this writer has waited to hear a live performance of Raff's masterpiece: hopefully uncut, since Herrmann's legendary performance – as I discovered perhaps a decade later when I was able to purchase an antiquarian score – has short cuts in the first and second movements and quite an extensive one in the finale. It was not until purchase of the ASV CD and the Philharmonia Orchestra under Franco d'Avalos that I discovered what wonderful music was missing. While there certainly have been a few (very few!) performances of *Im Walde* in the past half century, none were possible for this writer to attend – until now, 52 years later.

Unfortunately for me, the Hagen performance of *Im Walde* had cuts, but it is doubtful that anyone aside from this listener had the vaguest notion of anything missing. Without a score in hand it was impossible to tell what and where, but the timing of about 40 minutes leads one to estimate an overall loss of approximately 5 minutes, not all of which was in the finale, which usually gets the more egregious excisions. After the concert I was allowed the opportunity for about 20 minutes conversation not only with (guest) conductor Stoehr but also with the orchestra's general music director Florian Ludwig (and a very brief encounter with a cellist in the orchestra along the way, whose enthusiasm for the piece was quite infectious: he had never heard the name of Raff before the program and had been stunned that such music could be so neglected). After the review proper, there is a summary of the extremely interesting – and heartening! – backstage encounters.

The symphony: first section, During the Day (Impressions and Sensations), *Allegro-poco piu allegro*, F major (first movement). For those who know the work, it is essentially descriptive as opposed to programmatic, though obviously one may indulge whatever poetic ideas which the music arouses. In the first movement Stoehr opted for rather brisk tempi throughout which, while initially questionable to these ears, soon seemed correct considering his obviously well considered interplay of nuance, for he gave the music a freshness of impulse missing in some CD recordings. Stoehr did not rush things, even though he seemed faster than most comparisons I could make. His general conception tended to unfold with exciting tension as the movement got underway and if the lyrical moments weren't as relaxed as some might want, they were projected with glorious ensemble delivery and raised this listener's appreciation of the players. The orchestra responded beautifully to Stoehr's obvious commitment to and appreciation of Raff's unique sense of invention and balance.

With barely a break after the soft conclusion of the first movement Stoehr launched into the symphony's second section: In the Twilight (Dreaming), *Largo – poco meno mosso*, A-flat major (second movement). The tempi utilized can be described as normal for this movement, but Stoehr's judicious sense of rubato projected Raff's melodies with heart melting immediacy: strings were inspired to a glossy brilliance beautifully setting off the rest of the orchestra at climaxes. Stoehr seems to have understood that Raff does not aim at tragic expression in his melodies, but rather uncluttered beauty of tones in sequence,

meant to please the listener and refresh the spirit. There was also particularly lovely playing from horns and woodwinds during the movement. The final soft bowed chord of this slow movement had barely faded when the third movement scherzo, Dance of the Dryads (*Allegro assai – poco meno mosso*) whisked in from the silence and what a performance! If this writer considers it the fastest he has ever heard the movement, then corollary must be the most thrilling! No, it wasn't so fast that the players were uncomfortable with the tempi, it was just VERY fast and actually the players seemed to exult in the tumult. The woodwinds were like phantoms flitting about and the strings seemed to be imbued with Paganinian spirit. The lovely contrast of the trio section provided effective balance: the string harmonics projected a relaxed tension for the gentle woodwind activity. The reprise of the scherzo truly reflected the section's fantastic element and one could almost feel the audience's breath escaping to the ether one as the music wisped to conclusion.

Stoehr did not proceed quickly into the finale, but took a reasonable pause – perhaps realizing what the orchestra had had to produce thus far. Again, this listener would have preferred a somewhat more leisurely pacing, particularly with the opening canonic treatment of the introduction's long melody, but the tempi for the following march section was appropriate with a number of turned heads when suddenly Tchaikovsky's Raff quote in the *Pathétique* manifested itself. Drama was certainly at the heart of Stoehr's conception and brass playing was exemplary, though the lovely melodic elements were set off with attentive string articulation. Everything was just fine with this listener until he was suddenly aware that things were missing: cuts were being made in the development section- alas, some of the finest moments featuring woodwind and brass interplay. There was a resulting lack of balance for this listener, but only because he was aware of recorded performances. We were soon approaching the end of the symphony. While few, if anyone, in the audience was aware of this, the loss of structural balance in my ear was disturbing. That being said, the symphony came to an end with appropriate majesty and the audience showed its appreciation with prolonged applause. The number of curtain calls for Stoehr and his orchestra were well deserved. Stoehr's performance of *Im Walde* was not just a *Kapellmeister's* dutiful read through. It was with best consideration a genuine manifestation of *Im Walde's* majesty and commendable representation of the genius of Joachim Raff.

Technically the Philharmonic Orchestra of Hagen is referred to as "provincial". The term lends itself to pejorative interpretation. It's amazing how well such orchestras can play and the Philharmonic Orchestra of Hagen acquitted itself more than satisfactorily under Stoehr. One wonders how much better the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra would be in the same piece, which it hasn't played in over 130 years. There are numerous "provincial" orchestras throughout the world, the vast majority staffed by trained professionals. If these are the ensembles that are willing to play Raff and they have such astute conductors at the helm like Andreas Stoehr, then Raff will be on his way back to wide appreciation. And that's what performance is all about.

AFTER THE CONCERT: As mentioned at the beginning of this review, I was given a chance to go upstairs backstage in the Stadthalle to converse with Herr Stoehr. Coming down the hallway as I reached the floor was a member of the orchestra, a cellist. Upon greeting me in passing, I simply smiled and said : "A wonderful job this evening, especially in the Raff." His eyes lit up and with unbounded enthusiasm replied: "Yes, yes! Isn't it?! It's wonderful and nobody plays it! I hadn't even heard of him till I saw his name programmed". There's much more to this encounter but that must suffice. Since he was a cellist (unaware of other Raff symphonies) I told him to root for No.10, *Zur Herbstzeit* - "it's a cellist's dream!". I estimate his age at late 30s, early 40s. As I left the cellist, I was halted by a gentleman emerging from Stoehr's dressing room who had obviously overheard the lively banter between me and the cellist. He introduced himself as Florian Ludwig, the official conductor of the orchestra. When I told him I was an American who had gone out of his way to hear the Raff *Im Walde* in Hagen, he erupted with effusive joy and a lengthy conversation ensued during which I made more suggestions for Raff – and put in a good word for Felix Draeseke! Sensing that I wished to speak with Stoehr, he grasped my hand and shaking it said in farewell: "I would so like to do *Welt Ende!*"

Stoehr and his wife greeted me as I walked in. I can only highlight what was discussed, if only because I've forgotten details. I told him that I had made a special effort to hear the performance of *Im Walde*. Probably having overheard some of the conversation with Florian Ludwig and sensing my acquaintance with Raff from what he may have heard, he almost immediately preempted any questions of cuts in the symphony, by regrettably apologizing for having made some. Those that were made, he insisted, really were victims of rehearsal time. Not only had the Williams bassoon concerto demanded greater attention than estimated, but the orchestra (Stoehr's words) had to be enlightened about Raff's style. From the finesse in the performance I had realized that Stoehr had studied *Im Walde* thoroughly and truly wanted to demonstrate the greatness of the work. Despite the cuts, I honestly estimate that he did and the symphony definitely found favor with an obviously unprepared audience. Stoehr insists on performing *Im Walde* elsewhere - hopefully uncut - and listened to my suggestions about other works by Raff (and Draeseke!). One can only be heartened by such sincere dedication and interest in a still reasonably young artist (not yet 50).

Alan Krueck