

Maledictory Musicology

or

The Jettisoning of Scholarship for the Sake of Indulging in the Supercilious and Mean-Spirited on Behalf of Authoritative Posturing in Defamation of a Composer

By Alan H. Krueck

Allegheny Chapter Meeting, American Musicological Society, Geneva College, Beaver falls, PA, USA
7 October 2006

Beginning almost immediately after the death of Joachim Raff in 1882, a movement began to remove his name from its position of prominence in 19th century music which it had attained. This movement was manifest from various angles, so that no one group or person can be said to have done the most to launch and support it to the degree of denigration which flourished throughout the 20th century. In English it had a great impetus from Sir George Henschel (aka Georg Henschel, an intimate and supporter of Brahms) in the first Grove's. In German speaking lands various younger composers and conductors mounted the attack demeaning Raff, perhaps foremost being Felix Weingartner. Other music annotators like Leopold Gerlach, the biographer of August Klughardt - a friend and admirer of Raff whom Raff had helped in acquiring performances of Klughardt's *Waldleben* and *Lenore* symphonies - turned surprisingly derogatory. At the beginning of the 20th century it became commonplace to read unsupported and derisive criticism of Raff's works, criticism which seemed primarily aimed at removing Raff from recognition as one of the 19th centuries greatest symphonists and placing him on the level of a feeble purveyor of sentimental salon tidbits to be ignored. Such contempt for Raff reached a notorious pinnacle when Arturo Toscanini (quite a Raff supporter until his move to the United States) led the New York Philharmonic in a performance of the *Im Walde* Symphony in 1932 and received a finger-wagging critique by (a youngish) Olin Downes about programming such meretricious and outdated music, which not even Toscanini could resuscitate. Few musicians, critics and historians did more than reiterate the denigrations of people ignorant of Raff's major output. After World War II he was unknown, with neither Germans nor Swiss evincing interest in him until the 1980s. In the United States Deems Taylor did question Raff's dismissal but it was Bernard Hermann who did what was really a yeoman's job of bringing some attention to Raff's music with his legendary 1950s CBS Orchestra performances of *Im Walde* and *Lenore* - though well received, Hermann thereafter had already departed for Hollywood. He never forgot Raff and his recording - partially funded by him - of the *Lenore* Symphony continues to sell well and convince the curious and open-minded of the greatness of Raff. Since the 1980s the Raff revival has been underway, with recordings now of just about all his major works, including multiple sets of the eleven symphonies. Yet while a record buying public embraces their discoveries, the musical establishment - performers, critics, and managers - continue to dismiss Raff, many of them even ignorant of Raff's name when mentioned, though if not ignorant of him, the clichés about his worth are spitted out gleefully. Raff supporters are forced to grin and bear it and hope that a few listenings might revise such unfounded prejudicial opinion. What is most upsetting when it occurs, and such is the prompt for this article, is to read an accredited scholar, with a doctorate in musicology, and a career and business in program annotation, indulge in Raff-bashing by ignoring some of the most basic principles of research and fact verification in criticism and musicological research methodology. This paper is not meant as a personal attack to start a vendetta, but as a calling to task of someone who should know better when posturing as an authority on a subject, especially when that subject is Joachim Raff.

The matter being criticized in this document concerns several paragraphs in program notes concerning Franz Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E flat major provided for a concert of the Oklahoma City Philharmonic Orchestra in its 2002-2003 season.

The paragraphs from the program notes for the Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1 under question here concern Joseph Joachim Raff. As many readers may know, Raff is a major subject of interest for this musicologist. As you read the quotes, it's my conviction that you will note a rather mean-spirited undertone in assuring an audience of 2003, that the hundred some years of neglect which has pretty much obliterated Raff's name in any pantheon of 19th century masters is well deserved, a petty charlatan of minor talent who is remembered primarily today for a questionable relationship to Liszt in Weimar, a man whose bloated reputation as a composer has deserved the mockery and ridicule in its deflation over the past 100 some years since his death in 1882. As this writer has indicated, no composer in the history of music of such note and popularity during his lifetime has suffered such ignominious posthumous assault of his achievements. Comments of disregard have often been colored by sneeringly derisive citations, such as Arthur Elson's conclusion in his *American Composers* (1914, p.14) that Edward MacDowell's talent had been spoiled by study with Joachim Raff. That is but one of countless gratuitous attacks on Raff's worth which can be read throughout the 20th century. Opinion-makers seem to have nurtured a special malice toward a man whose music – as can be read in just about any book on music dealing with the late 19th century published before the First World War– was regarded as being on the highest level of achievement, a man whose name was unhesitatingly cited in the realm of instrumental music as being equal to such contemporaries as Liszt, Brahms and Tchaikovsky. The person responsible for the quotations presented here seems evidently only too eager to keep alive the concept of Raff as a prime example of deserved disregard and his gratuitous invocation of Raff's name for continued and deserved defamation seems almost pathologically motivated. From the standpoint of honest musicological endeavor the program note insertion about Raff is riddled with poor research, indulgence of unproven statements and outright – and embarrassingly - obvious falsehoods to bolster public trust of what is supposed to be authoritative reporting.

Let us examine the paragraphs from the standpoint of the outline in the title of this paper on maledictory musicology. One of the definitions granted the verb "jettison" in Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (p. 725) reads: "to discard (something) as useless or a burden". In order to assert authority in what follows in his program notes, that is exactly what the author does to maintain his posturing: well established facts are ignored, questionable statements are given little or no substantiation, outright falsehoods are asserted, obvious mistakes go uncorrected and self-serving conclusions are reached which in essence have no bases. All this is to gratuitously assure the naïve reader, probably ignorant of the composer's name much less his one time fame, that Joachim Raff deserves even more than the demeaning defamation with which he has been treated for a century and a quarter.

The paragraphs relevant to this paper represent a rather lengthy excursus in the program notes dedicated to Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1. To be fair, the program annotator does inform the reader that he has cursory acquaintance with Raff's piano concerto, but dismisses it as negligible - read meretricious - a comment no doubt deemed necessary to support the authoritative and fair considerations which are to follow.

Let us begin with reference to one glaringly silly conclusion and a good indictment of the carelessness of the researcher: "So the legend of Liszt's learning how to handle an orchestra from a younger and (as we see him) far less imaginative composer should be definitively thrown out as the wishful thinking of Raff's widow, trying to draw attention to the work of her late husband." One is led to believe that the idea of Raff orchestrating Liszt's works was a fabrication begun by his wife after the deaths of both Raff and Liszt.

That "idea" had been in circulation before the deaths of either Raff or Liszt and we have it on authority of a century and a quarter of Liszt research that Liszt freely admitted that he discussed his orchestration of works with Raff and that Raff wrote out scores after consulting with Liszt on Liszt's wishes. That fact is blithely ignored here to present a picture of a devoted wife willing to create a myth to add prestige to her husband's reputation, which is totally false. What is truly stupefying is that in a preceding paragraph the writer of the notes states that it has been "...demonstrated conclusively that Helene Raff's story was false; she was making claims for her husband with virtually no basis in fact," and identifies Raff's wife not as Doris Raff, but as Helene, Raff's daughter! So much for checking facts.

Our attention is called to the expertise of Dr. Jay Rosenblatt of the University of Arizona, who supposedly debunked the idea of Liszt using Raff as an orchestrator by having "... assembled all the sketches, drafts and scores of [Liszt's] First Piano Concerto and demonstrated conclusively that Helene Raff's story was false." Helene Raff did indeed publish letters by her father in 1904 in which Raff does assert playing a considerable part in orchestrating certain of Liszt's works, unfortunately in a tone which strikes one today as a bit arrogant and overstated, but the basic truth of doing orchestrations with and for Liszt remains, and not as in the parenthetically observed conclusion drawn by the writer of the Oklahoma City Philharmonic program notes where he states in paragraph two, "... the idea that Raff had more experience as an orchestrator than Liszt was ludicrous when examined closely. Liszt was a full decade older than Raff and had had an opera performed [*Don Sanche*] with his own orchestration when he was only 13 years old..." This is based on preferred interpretation of a question still not completely resolved even today by such Liszt scholars as Alan Walker and Leslie Howard: did the 13 year old Liszt actually orchestrate his only opera *Don Sanche* or did someone else do it for him or even, did the young Liszt have guidance in a novice attempt at orchestrating? In the booklet accompanying the only recording of *Don Sanche* to date, that by Hungaroton in 1986, the annotator Andras Batta states unequivocally: "It is a fact, however, that the orchestration was not Liszt's." And to be sure, this writer would doubt Liszt's youthful ability at orchestration, but in preparation for this paper he inquired of Alan Walker, author of the most authoritative biographical study of Liszt in English, and Dr. Walker (presently on the faculty of McMaster's University, Hamilton, Ontario) replied with the following e-mail message:

"Liszt himself may have answered your question. In old age he told Lina Ramann that he worked on *Don Sanche* 'under the direction of the illustrious master [Ferdinando] Paer'. You will find this comment on page 116 of Lina Ramann's *Lisztiana*."

Though Alan Walker goes on to inform this writer that Liszt probably wrote an overture to *Don Sanche* during a stay in Britain before his return to Paris and the necessity of orchestrating the whole opera for production, that does not exclude orchestration of the overture while being guided by Paer with the remainder of the opera. The conclusion one comes to is that Liszt may have written out the orchestration but with Paer advising what and how. Hence any previous ability of Liszt with orchestration seems reasonably minimal, considering Liszt didn't undertake any real orchestral works until Weimar and the late 1840s and then involving not only Raff, but August Conradi (1821-73) as well, who was called for assistance in the first version of *Tasso*, numbered as Liszt's symphonic poem No.2, among other works

It is also interesting to refer to the parenthetical entry in the Oklahoma City program notes asserting that Liszt, in the supposedly few and inconsequential pieces never intended for publication which he gave to Raff to orchestrate, even then "... almost immediately crossed out many of Raff's thick, overblown orchestrations." Since no Liszt scholar known to this referent has ever come up with such an assertion, the question arises: if Liszt never intended publication of these works with supposed "thick, overblown orchestrations" by Raff, why would Liszt have bothered troubling to correct anything? And of course there is

the basic contradiction that Liszt didn't give things to Raff to orchestrate. Anyone the least bit acquainted with Raff's orchestral works will admit that they are models of clarity and balance – one wonders if the program annotator judges Liszt's symphonic poems *Hungaria*, *Mazeppa* and the "Battle of the Huns" as models of lean and clean examples of disciplined orchestral sound?

The final installment of this critique goes back to the invocation of Jay Rosenblatt's paper on the Liszt Piano Concerto No.1 from the national meeting of the American Musicological Society in Kansas City in 1999 at which this writer was present. Jay Rosenblatt treated a topic that seems never to have been researched, the possibility that Joachim Raff had had a hand in the orchestration of Liszt's E-flat piano concerto. Dr. Rosenblatt made a convincing argument for the case that the piano concerto as published was entirely by Liszt, although Raff did admittedly write in one of his posthumously published letters that he had had a substantial hand in the concerto's orchestration. Without further investigation the writer of our program notes extrapolated Rosenblatt's observations in a self-serving manner to include all of Raff's involvement with Liszt's orchestral works of the time. Had the writer of Oklahoma City program notes glanced at the Kansas City programs for the 1999 AMS national meeting and consulted the printed abstracts and programs, he might have noticed that the paper which immediately followed that by Rosenblatt was "Amanuensis or Author? The Liszt-Raff Collaboration Revisited" by Paul Allen Bertagnolli - a wonderful condensation of facts from a model of a carefully and painstakingly researched dissertation of 1,000 pages-plus regarding Raff's orchestration not only for Liszt's overture for Herder's play *Der entfesselte Prometheus* ("Prometheus Unbound"), which Liszt later revised and published as his symphonic poem No. 5, but also Raff's influence on Liszt's choruses for the drama involving the orchestra!

And that shall be the final statement on a gratuitous, misleading and thoroughly odious diatribe against Joachim Raff, a man who for too long has been mindlessly dismissed as a composer of poor taste, questionable inspiration, and music of no value - **and** who should above all be **ignored!** Who knows what lingering, subconscious negative reaction to the name of Joachim Raff has been planted in naïve and inexperienced concert-goers by this example of: **Maledictory Musicology or, The Jettisoning of Scholarship for the Sake of Indulging in the Supercilious and Mean-Spirited on Behalf of Authoritative Posturing in Defamation of a Composer.**