

Joseph Joachim Raff

(b. Lachen near Zurich, 27 May 1822 - d. Frankfurt/Main, 24 June 1882)

Orchestral Prelude to Shakespeare's Othello (1879)

In a career that saw the composition of nearly three hundred works in virtually every conceivable form, it is interesting to note that Joachim Raff (1822-1882) did not produce a single symphonic tone poem. Given that his catalogue contains at least 40 non-vocal works with poetic titles or allusions (to say nothing of individual movement titles), the absence of this most fundamental of later 19th century Romantic forms presents a fascinating anomaly.

Generally, the literature of instrumental program music can be divided into three categories. The first includes works which try to represent the specifics of a given poetic or dramaturgical text. The second includes *character pieces* of any size or shape which can be considered roughly the equivalent of *musical portraiture*. The third consists of pieces with more generic literary titles which are meant to imply content rather than to dictate it explicitly. Without, for the moment, examining the issues pertaining to the uses of conventional versus unconventional formal structures in these types, one could safely say that most of Raff's instrumental programmatic music falls somewhere between the second and third categories. Such titles as "Ode au Printemps¹," "L'amour de Fée²," "In den Alpen³," "Frühlingsklänge⁴," "Frühlingsboten⁵," "Vom Rhein⁶," "Blätter und Blüten⁷," "Reisebilder⁸," "Abends Rhapsodie⁹," "Zur Herbstzeit¹⁰," "Von der Schwäbischen Alb¹¹," "Im Sommer¹²," or "Der Winter¹³," do not tell stories, or express great philosophical, metaphysical, or political ideas and ideals. They give, rather, the more general sense of the emotive content of the pieces which they adorn. They keep more to the spirit of Beethoven's famous aphorism, *Mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Mahlerey* (*More expression of the feeling than painting*).

Furthermore, Raff tended to be unsympathetic to that aspect of musical romanticism which headed inexorably towards the late 19th century's hyper-emotionalism. Indeed, from the vantage point of the second decade of the 21st century one could easily note that for all the deceptive surface conventionalities of his manner, he gazes prophetically well beyond the more dominant trends in music of his time. In contradistinction to many of his contemporaries, Raff placed great stock in sly, discrete humor and highly refined intellectualism. This apparent anomaly is singularly curious in light of his early professional association with Franz Liszt where, among other things, he was instrumental in assisting with the preparation of the orchestrations of several of the

¹ Ode au Printemps, Opus 76 (1857)

² L'amour de Fée, Opus 67 (1852)

³ Symphony #7 ("In den Alpen"), Opus 201 (1875)

⁴ Symphony #8 ("Frühlingsklänge"), Opus 205 (1876)

⁵ Frühlingsboten, Opus 55 (1850-1852)

⁶ Vom Rhein, Opus 134 (1866)

⁷ Blätter und Blüten, Opus 135a (1866)

⁸ Reisebilder, Opus 160 (1870)

⁹ Abends Rhapsodie, Opus 163b (1874)

¹⁰ Symphony #10 ("Zur Herbstzeit"), Opus 213 (1879)

¹¹ Von der Schwäbischen Alb, Opus 215 (1881)

¹² Symphony #9 ("Im Sommer"), Opus 208 (1878)

¹³ Symphony #11 ("Der Winter"), Opus 214 (1876)

older composer's symphonic poems. Yet for his apparent avoidance of the form, Raff's music, as mentioned above, is replete with the earmarks of the program music aesthetic, even if these are largely restricted to the choice of titles for whole pieces, or movements within pieces.

Raff, like other composers of his day, was ultimately attracted to William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) plays and sonnets which had become subjects for operas, symphonic poems, lieder, character pieces and incidental music throughout the 19th century. In German speaking countries, this would have been facilitated by the Schlegel-Tieck translation completed in 1833 which effectively raised Shakespeare's status to a level of importance equal to that of Schiller and Goethe. In Raff's case, the most *specifically* hidden Shakespearean *incident* (...) occurs in the scherzo of his 9th Symphony ("Im Sommer") where explicit references to "A Midsummer Night's Dream" are given personification by means of a solo viola and a solo cello. In this unprecedented instance [rehearsal letter **D**], the duet is clearly *marked in the score* ("Oberon und Titania") : the viola is *labeled* "Titania" – rather than viola solo, and the cello is *labeled* "Oberon" – rather than solo cello. No words spoken by either character in the play are actually quoted in the score. A listener unaware of this might have thought, for a moment, that he had fallen into the middle of "Don Quixote," that distinctly un-Shakespearean tone poem of Richard Strauss. But, of course, this latter work would not be written for eighteen years (1897), whereas Strauss' own symphonic poem, *Macbeth* (1887-1890), would have a distinctly Raffian energy and objective brusqueness to it!

Raff's most specific extra-musical literary adventure, aside from the explicit reference to Gottfried August Bürger's *Leonore* (1773) (i.e. the 5th Symphony of 1872), comes down to us as 4 *Shakespeare-Ouverturen* composed in 1879, during his tenure as director of the Hoch Conservatory of Music in Frankfurt. In that year, Raff also wrote the *Suite for Violin and Piano*, Opus 210, *Welt-Ende – Gericht – Neue Welt*, Opus 212, *Symphony #10*, Opus 213, *Aus der Adventzeit*, Opus 216 and *Frühlingslied*, WoO 49. The four overtures, in order of composition, are *Der Sturm* (The Tempest), in G minor, WoO 50, *Macbeth*, in C minor, WoO 51, *Romeo und Julie* (Romeo and Juliet), D major (although ultimately in D minor), WoO 52, and *Othello*, WoO 53, which, by contrast, begins *in and around* D major but which ends squarely in the tonic minor. Although Raff probably did not intend the four works to be played together as a suite, they continue the line of formal innovations that characterize the last four symphonies, indeed much of Raff's music of the 1870s. Specifically, they make use of highly fragmented, seminally expressionistic dramatic formal progressions in what are essentially *durchkomponiert* (through-composed) constructs. In the present set of pieces, Raff finally abandons all pretenses to the specifics of sonata-form and the closed ternary types by making an incredible stylistic leap into what can only be described as a species of structural cubism in which pieces are built out of the recurrent juxtaposition of blocks of materials. In many respects, these pieces leave the 19th century far behind even as they continue to utilize fundamentally tonal syntax. The effect, especially in *Macbeth*, is thoroughly disturbing, jarring and, for all the sweeping lines and passing swipes at more conventional lyricism, not so much post-romantic as utterly anti-romantic. Of the many aspects of Raff's musical persona, the very strong tendency towards emotionally controlled objectivity, comes to full fruition in the Shakespeare overtures.

At his death in 1882, Raff left a number of works that were either unperformed and/or unpublished. The four Shakespeare Overtures fall into this category. *Der Sturm* was first performed on 4 February 1881 in Weisbaden conducted by Louis Lüstner, who consistently championed Raff's works. *Macbeth* was similarly premiered in Wiesbaden

under Lüstner almost a year later on 13 January 1882. *Romeo und Julie* was premiered a year and a half after Raff's passing, again conducted by Lüstner in Wiesbaden on 4 January 1884. It was later performed in London conducted by Hans Richter. *Othello* had to wait until the late 20th century for a first hearing. Raff's pupil, the American composer Edward MacDowell, expended a great effort on his late teacher's behalf. He was able to negotiate contracts for the publication of the overtures with the Boston (USA) firm of Arthur P. Schmidt, who also maintained offices in Leipzig. Schmidt's title page lists the four works as "4 Shakespeare-Ouverturen," with MacDowell as the editor and copyright holder. Those that were actually printed are registered as such in the U S Library of Congress, in June, 1891. Schmidt, however, only brought out *Romeo* and *Macbeth*. *Othello* and *Der Sturm*, at least until their present new published editions, remained in manuscript. The first actual pages of both, however, list each as "Orchester-Vorspiel zu...," as does Albert Schäfer's *Chronologisch-systematisches Verzeichnis der Werke Joachim Raff's*. The difference between the terms *Vorspiel* and *Overture* is probably a function of the fact that an "Overture" can refer not only to an introduction to a specific theatrical work, but also to a more generic orchestral work not necessarily connected to anything, likely even the progenitor of the symphonic form (i.e. Mendelssohn). A *Vorspiel*, on the other hand, is generally a prelude or introduction attached to a specific theatrical work or portion thereof. Edward MacDowell may not have distinguished between the two as the terms are virtually interchangeable in English. The particular production of *Macbeth* that Raff must have imagined would indeed have been extraordinary judging by the composition bearing its name.

What, then, are the salient characteristics of the four works in general, and *Othello* in particular? How do their formal procedures and emotional shapes compare to the "standard issue" symphonic poem? Judging by the examples of Liszt, Tchaikovsky and Richard Strauss, then, we would expect to have works written for larger, rather than smaller orchestras encompassing a fairly wide range of emotive states, tempi and forms. Many of Liszt's symphonic poems, whose earlier versions Raff orchestrated for Liszt, are based on extended sonata forms. Strauss will utilize variations (*Don Quixote*), sonata forms (*Macbeth*, *Don Juan*), rondo types (*Till Eulenspiegel*), multi-sectional aggregates (*Also Sprach Zarathustra*, *Alpensymphonie*). All of them, however, tend to be unified by a *small* group of primary musical ideas whose *development* constitutes the essential structural element in their various applications. Raff, true to form, discards the entire kit and caboodle!

In place of a large (or larger) orchestra, Raff maintains his standard instrumental ensemble: 2 Flutes, Piccolo, 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 4 Horns, 2 Trumpets, 3 Trombones, Timpani, and Strings. The longest of the four, *Der Sturm*, which resembles *Macbeth* in its construction and method, is close to fourteen minutes in duration. The shortest, *Othello*, is only slightly more than eight minutes long, which is even shorter than "runner up" *Romeo and Julie*. Consistent as regards the basic formal syntax as utilized in the other overtures Raff establishes a primary Allegro, and then maintains it (with relatively minor adjustments on either side of the starting point) all the way through. Contrary to the more usual romantic practice, in place of long expository statements, elaborate thematic ideas and counterpoint, Raff establishes several principal thematic fragments that are not the least bit Wagnerian (at least insofar as character motives are concerned). However, it is in the matter of formal layout that Raff's four *vorspiele* differ most radically from all other models and examples. Raff does not so much develop his materials as he *uses them largely as fixed, completely self-contained epigrammatic character blocks which are juggled cubistically, and presented in numerous combinations of sequences* roughly mimicking the dramatic arches of the

plays they represent. The two shorter overtures, lacking the time element, are more epigrammatic than explicit.

Romeo und Julie is not so much a condensation of the action of play as of its situation. Similarly, *Othello* is more concerned with the fact of the title character's tragic love for Desdemona and the conflict with Iago. Its opening is one of the early examples of bi-tonality making use as it does of an upward moving oscillation between D major and A-flat major. This remarkable passage bares a spooky and uncanny resemblance to the opening of "*Mercury, the Winged Messenger*," the third movement of Gustav Holst's suite "*The Planets*," written in 1914, both materially as well as harmonically. This fact alone is astonishing considering that *Othello* was not heard in public until the 1980s, it is surmised, when Werner Andreas Albert conducted The Philharmonia Hungarica in a series of performances and recordings of Raff's symphonies and other orchestral pieces! Its primary tritone shifting also pre-dates Stravinsky's use of the same device in "*Petrouchka*" by a good thirty years, even though one must also acknowledge that both Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) and Franz Liszt (1811-1886) made occasional but effective use of the tritonal relationship. Raff was, after all, Liszt's amanuensis for a number of years before striking out on his own professional career – and Berlioz was part of Liszt's "new music" circle in Weimar.

Taken as a whole, then, one is struck by several concurrent progressions in the four overtures. The first refers to the lengths of each of the pieces, specifically their total number of measures. *The Tempest*, the first in the set is, at 517 measures, the largest. *Macbeth*, the second, is markedly smaller at 350 measures. *Romeo* is virtually the same if only slightly larger at 358 measures. *Othello* is the shortest at 231 measures. The progression viewed in terms of performance time is more obvious. *The Tempest* is the longest at about 14 minutes, *Macbeth* is less than 12 minutes, *Romeo* is close to 9 minutes, and *Othello* is only somewhat longer than 8 minutes. Both *The Tempest* and *Macbeth* are far more elaborate in their character portraiture than either *Romeo* or *Othello*. The aesthetic distance between the first two and *Othello* in particular is enormous. *Othello's* tempo and meter, once established, do not change. One is tempted to characterize this as representing Othello's headlong plunge from the heroics of battle (D major) and love for Desdemona (B-flat major), into jealousy, rage and the ultimate death of the play's principal protagonists. Given that these overtures were written in fairly short order (when considering the other major works Raff produced in 1879), one might be tempted to say that he lost interest in the project as work continued – thus resulting in pieces of shorter and smaller scope as each way completed. It might be more to the point to say that the first two overtures were decidedly more experimental especially as one considers their formal organization, whereas the second two move on to a different kind of experimentation namely that of extreme dramatic, and therefore structural telescoping. Since it is known that Raff was considering other Shakespeare plays for "overture treatment" it is tantalizing to imagine what he might have done with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Coriolanus* (remembering Beethoven's example even though it was written for Heinrich Joseph von Collin's play) or *Henry VIII* (which C. C. Saint-Saëns would *operatize* in 1882, the year of Raff's death).

Interestingly, the standard 19th century practice for works pitched in the minor mode, usually over the course of large scale, multi-movement works (symphonies, concerti, operas, etc.) was to end in the parallel major key. Even Dvořák's *Othello Overture*, which is almost twice as long as Raff's version, ends rather emphatically in F-sharp major (having begun in and around F-sharp minor but also having spent a good deal of

time in and around B minor)¹⁴. The reverse is much less common, indeed miniscule by comparison. The most well-known example is likely Felix Mendelssohn's *4th Symphony* ("Italian") in A major, Opus 90 (1833) whose first three movements are relatively "sunny" pieces all in the major mode. The final tarantella, however, shifts to the parallel A minor and ends the piece on a decidedly dark if robust Vesuvian perhaps. A far less typical example is to be found in Richard Strauss' tone-poem *Don Juan*, Opus 20 (1888) whose primary tonality, E major, shifts only at the last possible moment to E minor. Both Raff's *Romeo* and *Othello* begin in and or around D major, but conclude in D minor thus paralleling to some extent the tragic endings of their source plays.

Aside from Raff's unusual contribution to the *Othello* musical literature, the play itself as subject matter for musical treatment in the 19th century is represented primarily by the concert overture by Antonin Dvořák (his Opus 93 written in 1892) and the opera by Giuseppe Verdi (written variously between 1881 and 1885). The only other major operatic treatment of the play (in the 19th century) was that of Gioachino Rossini (1816). Works predating Raff's overture include a Symphonic Poem, Opus 6 by Zdeněk Fibich (1873), an overture by August Ambros (<1876) which may have been published. Works post-dating Raff's overture (aside from the Verdi opera and the Dvořák overture) include overtures by Karl Mautsch (1882) and Marie Moody (1889), as well as a Symphonic Poem, Opus 27 by Arnold Krug (1884). The 20th century produced a correspondingly small number of *Othello*-based works. On balance, *Othello* is not particularly well represented in either the symphonic or operatic worlds, Dvořák, Rossini, Raff and Verdi notwithstanding.

As mentioned above, unlike the *Macbeth* and *Tempest* overtures, but more closely related to the *Romeo* overture, *Othello* is presented as a summation of the situation, not as a narrative or film score series of cues following the dramatic outline of the play. Indeed, there are but four distinct thematic/motivic elements whose juxtaposition gives the flavor of the whole. Its very brevity allows no time whatever either for elaborate development of the plot or the numerous characters in the play. The first consists of an insistent rhythmic figure tossed back and forth between the orchestra without the timpani, then timpani without the orchestra. The timpani attempt to establish the D-ishness of the as yet to be established principal tonality whilst the orchestra shifts back and forth between D major and its tonal antipode, A-flat major. For dramaturgical purposes, we refer to this as **A**.

¹⁴ For the record, Verdi's opera on *Othello* begins enigmatically on a C dominant seventh (as if it were preparing to resolve to C major – but doesn't) and ends four acts later as Othello dies peacefully after having just committed suicide in E major! Rossini's *Othello* begins in D major and ends dramatically enough with the remaining on stage characters proclaiming "Ah" over Othello's corpse on a B-flat dominant 7th which resolves dramatically to E-flat major!! Even Wagner could not, or chose not to let tragedies end in the minor mode – Valhalla goes up in flames in glorious technicolor D-flat major after all even as Siegfried, earlier in *Götterdämmerung*, leaps into the flames together with his horse, in something more typically minor-mode tragical.. This is part and parcel of the Christian concept of *salvation and resolution through death* which was a basic generating element in much of the literature, art and music of the 19th century, but whose hold on secular European philosophy and sociology was already in steep decline in the second half of the century.

C

19 1VI. 2VI. Br. Vc. Kb.

25 1u2VI. kl. br. u. vc. pizz. hrn. MSZU.

At measure 69, Raff introduces a fourth motive, **D**, a highly syncopated passage that appears to be a variant of **A** that could just as easily stand for Iago's character and his obsessions with Desdemona and Othello. At eight measures in length, it barely has time to do anything more but present itself as statement and highly telescoped development or extension.

D

69 fg. 1u2VI. pizz. vc. u. kb. kl. br. u. vc. pizz. MSZU.

72 fg. hrn. br., vc. u. kb (arco) MSZU.

At measure 77, Raff focuses on the juxtaposition of **C** and **D** suggesting Iago's personal intentions regarding Desdemona. At 26 measures in length this passage is barely enough time both in terms of bar count and duration to shift back and forth in a fractured sort of way reminiscent of similar passages in the Macbeth overture. However it quickly settles into a more extended development of this juxtaposition which takes us just beyond the midpoint of the entire piece.

At measure 104, the third and final change of key signature, this time to D minor, signals the beginning of a more formal elaboration of the four motives. Although at 113 measures, the single longest episode in the piece, it follows the practice established in the other overtures of continuous juxtaposition of its four principal motives which, while not necessarily giving a protracted description of the events of the play's central conflict, do indeed illustrate the Beethovenian concept (...) of *Mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Mahlerey*.

The final 16 measures of the work constitute a typically Raffian collision of severely (if not totally truncated) recapitulation (more a suggestion of a recapitulation rather than a full recap per se which would, given the circumstances at the end of the play, be beside the point) and coda. Building quickly to its peroration, we are given the simultaneity of **A** and **B** (but with **B** in augmentation) and the final arrival of *D minor* as the uncontested tonality of the work. The overture ends with the full fury of its representation of the three principal characters and the tragedy of their mutual deaths and murder.

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