

JOACHIM RAFF

Overture to Johann Gottfried von Herder's *Der entfesselte Prometheus* by Franz Liszt instrumentation by Joachim Raff RV.539

*"Notte e giorno faticar"*¹

Joachim Raff's Contributions to Franz Liszt's "Prometheus" Overture

I.
For the celebrations surrounding the 100th birthday of Johann Gottfried von Herder, Franz Liszt - Hofkapellmeister in Weimar since 1848 - composed an overture and eight choruses with orchestral accompaniment for a performance of Herder's *"Prometheus Unbound"* (*"Der entfesselte Prometheus"*), a work in thirteen mythological scenes. The work was performed at a presentation of the Weimar court theatre and involved stage scenery, costumes, limited action and with Liszt's incidental music. There were no subsequent performances. Liszt had composed the music in a great hurry between May and June 1850. He began with sketches for the choruses and then concerned himself with the overture, where he worked in themes from the choral parts. He wrote out the overture completely, but in 15 fragments and without introductory measures between the choral sketches, a version of the score with 115 entries containing two to five lines of notes. Indications for instrumentation vary from exact descriptions of instruments, to general information about instrumental groups like *"winds"* or *"brass"* or *"quartet"*, to unresolved ponderings like *"quartet?"* and sections completely without any such references. As Bertagnolli has shown, Liszt did not compose his overture in a continuous effort, but bit by bit and without chronological sequence. Liszt expended much labour on the composition of the fugue in the developmental section of the overture and made several versions of it in his sketches.

The young Joachim Raff had been working as Liszt's assistant in Weimar since the end of 1849 and had begun immediately to assemble performable scores from Liszt's orchestral sketches. Though Raff at the time had only relatively little experience in the area, he had nevertheless composed for the orchestra, as exemplified first in his opera *"King Alfred"* and then in his setting of Psalm 121. From these works, however, he had not heard a single note. Despite this, Raff's decisive manner and self-assurance must have moved Liszt to entrust Raff with a task of such responsibility. Raff worked on the score to Liszt's *"Prometheus"* music during July and August of 1851. Regarding the overture, his first task was to bring the fragmentary elements of the sketch into correct relationship with one another according to Liszt's specifications, and then to expand them in completed score using Liszt's indications for instrumentation. Raff produced a rough version for Liszt's approval. In this version (GSA 60, A5d) Liszt added numerous instructions regarding tempo, articulation and dynamics, but accepted Raff's instrumentation practically without

¹ *"Day and night, slaving away,"* a quote from *"Don Giovanni"* by Mozart/Da Ponte which Raff put down on the copy of Liszt's symphonic poem *"Prometheus"* after preparing it.

changes. Thereupon Raff completed a final first version of the orchestral score (GSA 60, B16b), the instrumentation of which is for all practical purposes the same as that in the rough version and which in addition contains all important instructions necessary for performance. It was this version which came to be performed on August 24, 1850, although it is not quite clear whether the few instrumental retouchings in Liszt's hand were incorporated into the parts which were actually performed². The present edition, which is based on Raff's final copy, shows having only taken over obvious mistakes corrected by Liszt, and not just the retouchings, so that this version remains documented in reasonably unchanged form. The possibility therefore arises, that perhaps for the first time, the work will be heard in Raff's orchestration minus any subsequent additions by Liszt.

Liszt composed a new version of the "*Prometheus*" overture between 1852 and 1854, this time in an apparently complete score (GSA/60 A5a). Raff also produced a fair copy of this version (GSA/60, A5b) which was able to be used in performances as well as in publication. In this form and with the new designation "symphonic poem" the work was premiered in Braunschweig on October 10, 1855. This was apparently the only time that Liszt conducted the work without the choruses which it precedes. In regard to this the work was revised once more and the changes, both in Liszt's hand and that of an anonymous contributor, were entered - partly pasted - into Raff's fair copy. "*Prometheus*" went in this form as final copy to Breitkopf und Härtel in Leipzig where, after Liszt's corrections in shorthand, it appeared as published score in May, 1858. All later editions (1885, 1911) feature this 1856 publication with but minor variations. The "*Prometheus*" Overture from the year 1850 remained in the archives however, and is published here for the first time.

The later course of Liszt's music for Herder's "*Prometheus Unbound*" was variable. The conductor Hans von Bülow championed the symphonic poem and achieved moderate success with it. Liszt himself conducted it but rarely. Since Liszt really had little regard for Herder's mythological scenes, he later commissioned Richard Pohl to write verbal commentary between the sections of his "*Prometheus*" music. It took at least a generation before the choruses established themselves as concert repertoire in the 1880s, but during the last decade of Liszt's life they could be counted among his most beloved compositions. They disappeared after Liszt's death and passed quickly into oblivion, so much so that the 20th century has witnessed but few revivals of the complete work of which they form a major part. The only recording of these choruses (LP) by Hungaroton is currently not available. Every now and then the symphonic poem gets performed, but like practically all of Liszt's orchestral works, it has been relegated to the periphery of the concert repertoire in our day.

II.

At this point a short outline about the construction of the composition would seem in order, as well as an account of the apparent discrepancies between the overture and the symphonic poem. An analysis of the symphonic poem can be found by Theodor Müller Reuter. The work of Paul Alan Bertagnolli provides us with a minutely detailed comparison of the two versions.

² "Some of the modifications may have been made in time for the premiere, but source material that would confirm such a supposition, namely a set of revised orchestral parts, has not been discovered. Most, however, were incorporated into A5a [Liszt's Autograph der symphonischen Dichtung "Prometheus"] and may be more properly regarded as precursors of the symphonic poem's features. As such, the emendations most likely originated during the preparation of a new score, as opposed to the correction of the old one for the premiere." (Bertagnolli, S. 541f.)

Both the overture, as well as the symphonic poem, follow the classical outline of a sonata-allegro, despite some departures in each. An introduction precedes the exposition, development and recapitulation and a coda is appended at the end. Quartal harmonies underscore the succinct "*Prometheus*" - theme when it is announced twice in the introduction. This beginning, which disturbed some of Liszt's contemporaries with its dissonant chords, is actually even more sharply accentuated by the addition of grating seconds to the quartal harmonies in the overture. The "*Prometheus*" -theme is actually used by Liszt noticeably less in the overture than in the symphonic poem, where it is spread throughout all the sections of the composition. In general, in comparison with the overture, the symphonic poem exhibits a much greater density of motivic-thematic interplay than the overture, something which not only mirrors Liszt's ripening as a symphonic thinker but also the temporal circumstances governing the evolution of both works. If Liszt had worked on the overture within a limited time frame, he certainly didn't have to worry about such pressures while making his transformation of it. A quasi-recitative like section, taken from the alto solo in the third chorus and based on the lines of Herders stanza "*Verödet stehn im alten Hain, der Götter Altäre*" ("*Decayed stand the gods' altars on the ancient meadows*"), follows a passage marked "*Grave*" and an outburst of the later main theme. The part of the exposition which follows, takes up the main theme already alluded to in the introduction but subordinates the "*Prometheus*" - theme, as well as the somewhat expanded quasi-recitative passage already incorporated in it. The whole exposition is shortened by Liszt in the symphonic poem by a good 80 measures, without, however, interfering with the basic thematic material or its fundamental development.

It is quite different with the second group of themes, which is twice as long in the overture than in the symphonic poem³. In the revision only the original middle part of the second thematic group - with the so-called "*Themis*" - motive - remained, whereas in the overture the "*Themis*" - motive is contained within the "*Hercules*" - theme (from the sixth and seventh choruses), with additional motives added or interpolated. If one has the original, longer version in one's ear, the impression is given that in the later version Liszt abridged too much and without its connecting motives and themes, the second thematic group doesn't fit as well into the context of the exposition.

The developmental section appears in the form of a fugue, which in the context of a sonata-allegro is somewhat surprising, because it introduces a completely new theme, not one that has already been presented. In a printed edition later in his life Liszt wrote over the beginning of the fugue the name "*Epimetheus*", the brother of Prometheus. Relative to the dissonant character of the introduction and first thematic group of the exposition is the series of sharp developmental dissonances characteristic of this fugue, dissonances which led the audience of Liszt's time to regard them as incomprehensible and which, along with the harmonic "crudities" of the introduction, accounted for a lack of acceptance of the work. Three episodes follow each of three related expositions. After two strettis the fugue concludes over a pedal point. Although the fugue in the symphonic poem differs from that in the overture in some details, construction and length are almost identical.

³ Comparative lengths, as determined by counting measures, have to take into account, as happens here, that Liszt notated the overture "a la breve" (with two half notes), but the symphonic poem in 4/4 time. That shows that comparative passages in the overture have actually twice the number of measures.

The pedal point at the end of the fugue is at the same time the basis for the second presentation of the "*Prometheus*"-theme, though Liszt, here at the beginning of the reprise, harmonises the theme differently than in the introduction. Without recitative interjections the overture proceeds further with a note-for-note repeat of the first part of the first thematic group. In the symphonic poem Liszt added a reminiscence of the quasi-recitative passages of the exposition before this part. The abbreviated first thematic complex is concluded by a long general pause in the overture, which is not to be found in the symphonic poem. From the second thematic complex only the "*Themis*" - theme is played at the reprise. In all, the reprise is less than half as long as in the exposition. To make up for this Liszt attaches an elaborate coda dominated by the "*Epimetheus*" - theme. A plagal cadence and two resounding chords of the full orchestra conclude the overture. The coda of the symphonic poem is expanded by a couple of measures. In addition, the "*Themis*" - motive resounds triumphantly once again. The earlier plagal cadence is replaced by motivic and harmonic reminiscences of the "*Prometheus*" - theme.

III.

With the appearance of the autobiography of violinist Joseph Joachim in 1896, that is, after both Liszt and Raff had died, the question concerning Raff's part in the authorship of certain symphonic works of Liszt came to the fore. As a result of Joachim's autobiography a number of other witnesses came forth, who testified as to the importance of Raff's role, and Peter Raabe, in his 1916 dissertation concerning the origins of Liszt's early orchestral works, dealt in detail with Raff's influence. Raabe observed quite correctly that one should not rely on letters or oral testimony for settling the question, but would have to rely on the musical sources to which he, as director of the Liszt museum, had unlimited access. Raabe's work in relation to this is in effect rather superficial and his apparent intention, divesting Liszt of Raff's influence, becomes contrary in the face of the single example cited from Liszt's "*Tasso*" overture, inasmuch as Raff's version deviates significantly from Liszt's composition and its instrumentation by August Conradi and stands much closer to the final publication than all other previous versions. Besides this, Raabe gets involved in contradictions. For example, he says on Page 34 of his dissertation: "*Raff not only had much finer taste than Conradi, but he also possessed above all that which Conradi lacked: fantasy. He was able to imagine any sound configuration whenever he saw a Liszt sketch and thereby, at the very least, aroused some enthusiasm in his mentor; and if, as stated, not many of these proposals remained in the final versions, what Liszt finally wrote down was nevertheless determined by the skilfully contrived suggestions of Raff.*" On the other hand we read on page 28: "*He [Liszt] really didn't want anything more than very carefully copied manuscripts (which Raff in his magnificent hand was unsurpassed in preparation) and above all, required more of a craftsman like than a creative assistance in preparing of orchestral scores from specifically designated drafts.*"

Even the relatively standard multi-volume standard work on Liszt's life and works by Alan Walker (1989) bases its single chapter dedicated to Raff, "*The Raff Case*", on Raabe's work and attempts, well within its glaring Liszt veneration, to degrade Raff's role to that of a mere assistant carrying out orders. Therein Walker allows himself the awkward manoeuvre at the end of his chapter on Raff of quoting from a letter of the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein, Liszt's paramour and declared opponent of Raff: "*Why are you giving Raff the task of orchestrating the (Goethe) March? What painter would be satisfied in giving his apprentice the task of colouring his sketches. You'll reply that Raff is no apprentice: but he isn't YOU!*" Now this doesn't really sound as if Raff had merely functioned as an

extended arm of Liszt, but it does stand in direct contradiction to the preceding comments of Walker.

In more recent times it was the work of Andrew Bonner, above all, which came to the defence of Raff and attested that the instrumentation of Raff's *"Prometheus"* score came into being *"with little or no input from Liszt."*

Yet whatever has previously been written on this subject is today completely surpassed by Paul Allen Bertagnolli with his dissertation on the genesis of Liszt's *"Prometheus"* music. The different surviving versions are analysed in over 1000 pages and an exact typology of Raff's contribution is realised. The result is that Bertagnolli, as he himself states, comes to a *"more balanced view"* in the conflict about the co-authorship of Raff and the *"Prometheus"* music⁴. Raff's basis for his work - Liszt's sketch for his composition - was neither a mere piano sketch nor a completely detailed score, but rather a complete sketch with partially precise, partially rough and partially missing instructions for instrumentation. Without changing the compositional substance, Raff expanded the sketch to a complete full score, orchestrated the parts without Liszt's indications according to his own imagination (especially in the question of the second thematic group), and either used or dismissed Liszt's suggestions for instrumentation; he added colour mixes with doublings, and expanded Liszt's intended orchestra with piccolo, alto clarinet (Basset horn), bass clarinet and tuba, as well as creating accompanimental figures and fanfare motives. All of this took place in relative freedom, but with Liszt's constant participation.

The question, to what degree does one measure these contributions of Raff in terms of compositional autonomy, depends, as an overview of the already published writings on this subject shows, on the attitude of each author toward Liszt and his work. The apologists for Liszt have always minimalised the importance of Raff, and others have dismissed Raff's merits with facetious contempt. *"I have a lot to thank him for his fine explications."* Liszt wrote to Raff's widow after his death in 1882 and outlined the relative importance which Raff's work had had for him. Liszt was able to gain worthwhile experience from Raff's primary orchestrations and many a detail therefrom remained even in the later printings. This last is a matter of fact relating to the *"Prometheus"* music deciphered by Bertagnolli which refutes the all-encompassing pronouncement of Raabe, that every ingredient of Raff had been pruned from the published versions by Liszt. Liszt was satisfied with Raff's orchestrations and even considered their publication. He did well not to have done so, preparing instead his own reworkings for publication. This in no way reduces the value of Raff's own work. His orchestrations for Liszt form an important milestone on his path as recognised master in this field. Liszt did not learn orchestration from Raff, nor was it the reverse case. It was the practical aspect of working with the Weimar Hofkapelle, with which they could experiment practically without limit and from which both composers could draw useful experience on their way to mastery in the handling of an orchestra. In regard to this they were not master and pupil but colleagues. What is of concern for Raff, is that Weimar remained for him simply an episode in his artistic development, the fruits of which he later dismissed, for reasons which today still remain uninvestigated. Raff never composed in a manner more modern, writing for a larger and more colourful one than the one during his Weimar residency. That involves not only his works for Liszt but also his own works, such as the oratorio *"Dornröschen"* (*"Sleeping Beauty"*) and the opera *"Samson"*,

⁴ "Using an original typology drawn from my study of the festival scores, I reveal the precise extent of Raff's duties and demonstrate that he in fact exercised a liberal degree of initiative in orchestrating Liszt's drafts. The composer, however, eliminated most - but not all - traces of scribal influence in later stages of revision" Bertagnolli, S. 6

which require the largest orchestras ever called for by Raff. Although many of Raff's works have recently become available in recordings, it is precisely this New German phase of his output that has until now remained undocumented and not integrated into the total picture of this composer. One may therefore easily understand the eagerness with which one awaits the first performances of the "*Prometheus*" Overture in the orchestration of Joachim Raff at two festivals in the summer and autumn of 2002.

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