

# JOACHIM RAFF

## Symphony No.2 in C major for large orchestra op. 140

### Rescued from the Forgotten - Concerning Joachim Raff's Second Symphony, C major, Op. 140

Whoever today pages through the usual concert guide to orchestral music in the hope to learn something about the works of Joachim Raff (1822-1882), will be either forced to contend with the negligible or put up with a few uninformative lines in which one is told that Raff composed eleven symphonies containing peculiar titles which today mitigate acceptance, such as "An das Vaterland" ("To the Fatherland"), "In den Alpen" ("In the Alps") and certainly "Gelebt, Gestrebt, Gelitten, Gestritten, Gestorben, Umworben" ("Lived, Striven, Suffered, Fought, Died, Acclaimed") and which, although quite successful in their time, nevertheless were relegated to oblivion after their composer's death. The entries in professional lexika are scarcely more illuminating, since the contributors apparently have not been able to confront the scores, so long unavailable in print, the results being value judgments arrived at "within concrete historical contexts", which merely endorse those of their predecessors. This is the manner in which writings on Raff became ever more distanced from the realities of his works, a condition unaltered after the Second World War, since they were rarely performed.

Among the few declared supporters of Raff's music one may count the American composer and conductor Bernard Herrmann, who in the late 40s broadcast fascinating programs in which the famous resounded alongside the neglected. His radio recordings of Symphony No.3, "Im Walde" ("In the Forest") and Symphony No. 5, "Lenore" from 1949/50 have never been available commercially. Twenty years later Herrmann stepped forth again and financed on his own the first recording of a Raff orchestral work. His controversial interpretation of the "Lenore" Symphony has remained to this day unchallenged as the most exciting available, despite exaggerated expression in some episodes. Five years were to elapse after Herrmann's death before another hope of further Raff recordings arose.

In the 70s hardly anyone moved a finger on behalf of Raff's symphonic output. That was to change by 1980 when an integral recording of the symphonies named after the four seasons was realized in Basel, and a few years later the Marco Polo label set itself the task of a complete recording of all eleven symphonies, primarily with an orchestra from Slovakia. Soon isolated recordings from other firms joined the list. As a result people could at least study any surviving scores while listening (except for a Symphony in E minor composed in 1854 and which was lost after several performances before reaching publication). Nevertheless, anyone wishing to confront the published ones still has to overcome certain difficulties. Very few libraries, whether in Europe or America, have the original editions or early reprints and the manuscripts have been dispersed throughout the world, the greater part of them still not located. If one ignores some qualitatively inferior photo reprints of first editions, one may maintain that there hasn't been a single Raff symphony available in print for decades. With this edition, the first in the category of symphonic works, one hopes to help change the situation. In addition to corresponding projects of other

publishers, in which, among others, the symphonies of Niels W. Gade, Louise Farrenc, Josef Rheinberger and Felix Draeseke are appearing, one hopes the present project will help eradicate an exceptional and troubling lapse (the gap between Schumann and Brahms) and fairy tale interpretation of the history of the genre "symphony".

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Joachim Raff was born in 1822, a good decade after the generation of Romantics which included Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Chopin, Wagner and Verdi. At the time when he brought forth his first compositions - primarily the creations of an autodidactic - the German world of music had begun to split into two sections, sections which not only had their own journals and performance centers, but which also began to assume increasingly opposing positions to each other, whereby the particular party known as the "New German School" around Wagner and Liszt mounted exceptionally sharp attacks on the supporters of Mendelssohn and Schumann. Perhaps it's no coincidence then, that Joachim Raff was showered with encouraging words from both Mendelssohn and Liszt when he sent them his first compositions. Mendelssohn, who died too early to have become Raff's teacher, mediated contact with the publishing house of Breitkopf and Härtel, where Raff's early piano pieces appeared. Liszt, on the other hand, not only worked on behalf of Raff verbally, but also engaged him in 1849 as personal secretary in Weimar and where the younger man acted as amanuensis, above all in matters of instrumentation.

At the beginning of the 1850s Raff authored a number of newspaper articles which clearly signaled support of the "New Germans", but spoiled their effect on the Weimar party's soldiers completely by publishing a book in 1854 with the title "The Wagner Question", which, in a disrespecting manner, suggested mistakes by the idol and lent the 22 year old a schoolmaster's demeanor. In the period following, contact with the Liszt circle became noticeably cooler and Raff moved to Wiesbaden where he lived and worked as free lance composer until 1877. It was only in the last five years of his life that he assumed a position of importance, when he served as director of the newly founded Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt.

By nature unmistakably an individualist, he attempted as both composer and teacher to simultaneously mediate between the extremes and recruited faculty from both parties for his institution, without, however, being able to assuage differences in the opposing viewpoints. For those of Schumann heritage he remained the "New German", while the Wagner supporters had nothing to do with Raff. There were therefore few apologists who, after Raff's quite sudden death, took up his work for any amount of time, and that work was quickly overshadowed by more spectacular symphonies of successors.

Certainly today one can confront the music of Joachim Raff with greater composure, all 250 works of which it is comprised, and realize with appropriate distance from connections with the 19th century feuds and the cryptically abbreviating, generalizing historical tales of the century just past. The 250 works which comprise the music of Joachim can certainly be confronted today with more relaxed measure, especially if one takes into account present day distance from 19th century feuds, as well as cryptically generalizing historical statements from the century just past. One might even find it somewhat startling to realize that, along with the grandly ambitious symphonies of Brahms, Bruckner, Tchaikovsky and others, there might even be a place for a different type of symphonism, one which should not be measured according to the model of Beethovenian idealistic consolidation, despite the many exterior characteristics in Raff's music which might recall

such. After all, Raff's music comes from a different epoch and represents a completely different type of artistry.

One recognizes in Raff a lover of architecture, and his music is characterized by a robust architectonic make-up. Almost all the movements of the symphonies trust in symmetrical formulation of syntax and reject the stubborn rhythmic-metrical expressions which frequently exhibit themselves in scores of Schumann and Brahms. But there are exceptions to this rule, as is shown by Raff's Second Symphony: in its first and final movements, the many rhythmic variants and metric displacements are just the things which give rise to the optimistic, sweeping character of the pieces. Even more elegant is the effect of the chains of woodwind thirds in the Trio of the Scherzo, with which the composer offsets the regulating effect of the meter by delayed entrances.

Raff loved to also design his first movements as a succession of four sections (in the manner of an A-B-A-"B" formal outline), whereby the exposition and reprise, as well as the development and "generally uncommonly broad" coda, correspond to one another. With such a penchant in mind one shouldn't be startled to realize that Raff put less value on strongly altering the recapitulation relative to the exposition than did Brahms. After only 26 measures in the first movement of the Second Symphony he maneuvers to the median tonality of E major from the home key of C major; as may be expected, we again find the move in the recapitulation. What is a minor tonal surprise the first time finds stabilization as reminder and recall, not as a dynamic expression within the recapitulation, and suggests a new approach. At the same time the coda is re-evaluated and in altered form reflects the thicket of events in the development. As is frequent with Raff, his experience in utilizing sequence is part of the technique which dominates in the design of the first movement of the Second Symphony, a technique which affected Tchaikovsky and Glazunov and which was not only refined by them but, but intensified.

In general one might agree that Raff's materials seldom seem particularly original. Quadratic syntax, simple rhythmic design, predominantly diatonic scale patterns and a sense of harmony which seems to seek an ordained effect, leads one to the conclusion that Raff wasn't especially interested in the point of departure for his ideas. What was important to him was what one could do with them.

If, on the one hand, Raff's music seems to come across as folklike, easy-going, even predictable in weaker works, there is a contrasting dynamic to this static, even passive point of consideration, of which one is seldom directly aware. For what often comes across as simplistic in effect in isolated material (and rightly so if interpreters misunderstand Raff's paltry performance instructions as an invitation to generalization), reveals itself later with closer examination as an expression of erudition and virtuosity, paired with a realism, which one should certainly not hold against any original composer. Raff admired Berlioz and his remarkable prowess as orchestrator and Raff was, among German symphonists, the closest to his path, but nevertheless decided to utilize the reduced forces of a conventional orchestral size when in doubt in order to target an even more fascinating and sensual effect with such a limited arsenal.

From the very start one must abandon any search for grand existential gesture or tragic world view in the music of Raff, otherwise a barrier arises which does not permit admission to his spontaneous, easily formulated and colorfully contrived music. At any given moment it may sound like Beethoven, then Schumann or Liszt, or even more frequently like Mendelssohn, but it is impregnated with an original and civil tone. Since a tradition of Raff

performance has been interrupted, one tends to perceive similarities with contemporaries the way critics regarded the music of Johannes Brahms, at the very beginning, as a brooding continuation of the "Schumann school". Only with time, as a result of studying the scores of Raff, does it become apparent that certain melodic formulae, touches of instrumentation, types of modulation and expressive gestures frequently reoccur and finally gain an upper hand over the basic elements of synthesis, allowing one recognition of the composer's personal style. Franz Liszt especially made reference to the originality of Raff's style in a reasonably long article about Raff's secular oratorio, "Dornröschen" ("Sleeping Beauty").

How different in nature Raff is, is shown immediately by the beginning of the C major symphony. Which other composer of note would have at that point in history approached the opening of a symphony with such comparable optimism? The main theme, arising from characteristic tympani figuration, is not much more than a display of the tonic triad and the grandly scaled crescendi mirror everything possible, except any insecurity in the use of the orchestra.

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Joachim Raff's Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 140 originated in the year 1866 in Wiesbaden and was dedicated to "His Highness Ernst, Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha" for the 25th anniversary of his reign. The score and parts, as well as a four-hand piano arrangement by the composer, appeared in January 1869 by B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz. The C major symphony always stood in the shadows of the successful symphonies 3, "Im Walde" ("In the Forest") and 5, "Lenore", whose high numbers of performances it never even began to approach. Even Helene Raff, the daughter of the composer who died in 1942, used but few lines in reference to it in her biography, "Joachim Raff. Ein Lebensbild" ("Joachim Raff. A Portrait of His Life"), Regensburg, 1925: "It was just at this time [March, 1866 is meant] Raff began his second and programless symphony (in C major, Op. 140), about which there has been relatively little said, perhaps because it had the bad luck of following the "Fatherland" Symphony and preceding the "Forest" Symphony. At its first performance by Wilhelm Jahn at a court theatre concert in Wiesbaden on March 1, 1867, as well as under Raff's personal direction in a Gewandhaus concert in Leipzig, it earned great applause. But this seems to have been less the result of its melodic invention than excellent presentation." (P. 175) Nevertheless there is evidence of further performances in a wide geographical radius, as is documented on page 352 in Rebecca Grotjahn's dissertation "Die Sinfonie im deutschen Kulturgebiet 1850-1875" ("The Symphony in the German Cultural Realm, 1850-1875"), Sinzig, 1998, where performances are listed for April 11, 1869 in Berlin, January 8 of the following year in New York, then December 19 in Darmstadt, and finally March 4, 1871 in Moscow. For any documentation of a period after 1875, the international music journals would need be consulted; it is most likely that there weren't any further performances, since the scores fell pretty much to oblivion after their local premieres.

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At the beginning of this new century a symphonic composition of Joachim Raff, his Second Symphony, is now available in a new printing and in one which meets critical standards. The concert organizations prevalent today rarely make imaginative inquiry concerning one time concert favorites and have but rarely asked for scores of this composer; but there is hope that the republication of his symphonic works will lead to renewed performances of

these compositions, which once made Raff's name famous and should enrich orchestra repertoire even today, recognizing them as "singular musical complements to the realm of bourgeois-poetic realism." Let the present day public respond with enthusiasm similar to that declared by the English critic C.F. Barry on May 1, 1875 in an article which was part of a large series dedicated to Raff by the journal, "The Monthly Musical Record": "But though its composer has not furnished us with an explanatory programme of its contents, it by no means follows that it does not rest upon a poetical basis. Following, therefore, the example of the composer, who has made no avowal of his purpose, we refrain from conjecturing what this may have been. We have no hesitation, however, in stating it as our conviction that this second symphony of Raff's will, on its coming to England, prove as acceptable to the general listener on account of its pleasingly tuneful and genial character, as unquestionably it will be admired by musicians for its clever and thoroughly musicianly construction."

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