

Joseph Joachim Raff

(b. Lachen / Switzerland, 27 May 1822 – d. Frankfurt a. M., 25 June 1882)

Symphony No. 6 in d minor, Opus 189 (1873)

Except for its rather unusual sub-title, *Gelebt: Gestrebt, gelitten, gestritten; Gestorben; Umworben*, ("Lived: strove, suffered, fought; Died; Recognized") Joachim Raff's Sixth Symphony in D minor, Opus 189 (1873) *appears* to be amongst the more conventional of the eleven that he wrote between 1859 and 1879. But there's something about the all too obvious sprung rhythm of its rhymed title that suggests a ruse, a diversion. In a letter to Hans von Bülow on 13 April 1875 Raff wrote (in part) "The life of the artist is striving. This striving itself is simply the continuing battle against negation (suffering and conflict). The artist, though, does not fight with a club or with newspaper articles, but by developing new manifestations of the ideas that inspire him. I wanted to depict this from the sublime aspect of the first movement, from the humorous aspect of in the second movement... The third movement would be a lament for the fallen one. The fourth movement is far from an apotheosis in the usual sense. It begins, instead with joy at the end of suffering for the departed, until humming voices appear, suggesting that he was not as bad as all that and acclaiming the idea he followed whilst alive." Provocative as these words are, they can't be unequivocally accepted either as Raff's a priori thoughts, or his ex post facto musing for public consumption. One might take them literally, or they can be read ironically resulting in an entirely different interpretation. Without hearing the work, it is hard to know. However, there are clues buried in this prose such that one is immediately reminded of Queen Gertrude's oft quoted remark in Act III, Scene II of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." This suspiciously anguished Mahlerian confessional adeptly hides the fact Raff has provided an implicit ›program‹ which is distinctly at odds with the content of the score.

The symphony, composed in 1873, was given a successful première in the Royal Opera House in Berlin on 21 October 1874 as part of the 1st Symphonie-Soirée of the Royal Chapel by the Royal Court Orchestra conducted by Wilhelm Taubert. The score and parts were first published by Bote and Bock in October, 1874. In response to the initial press reviews Raff wrote a letter to his wife, Doris, in which he complained: "The Berlin newspapers are only justified in their Scherzo enthusiasm in connection with the fact that this piece was written with the most refined contrapuntal art and thereby delivered once and for all the proof that this lightest of all forms has incomparably greater capacity than one previously thought. The symphony has its worth mostly in its construction, which is determined by content (something that the gentlemen of the press don't seem to want to understand), by the connection of the last part to the first and the manner in which this relationship has been presented, in the novel construction of the first movement and in the vivid modern cast of the funeral march..." The all important clue, of course, is Raff's contention that the scherzo ("this lightest of all forms") potentially offers the composer the chance to do much more with the form. Mahler came to understand this principle even though in his hands it would assume a bitterness and sharp irony quite beyond anything Raff would have contemplated.

On the surface, Raff may have been miffed by the fact that only thing the critics noticed was the scherzo. In saying that the scherzo proved that »this lightest of all forms has

incomparably greater capacity than one previously thought«. Raff was not referring to the second movement as much as he was describing the work as a whole. This is partially borne out by such clues as the “novel construction of the first movement”, the “vivid modern cast of the funeral march”, the “connection of the last part to the first movement”. How does one “modernize” a funeral march? What is so unusual about the structure of the first movement? What is the relationship of the first to the last movement? Although it requires an in-depth analysis of the work to answer these questions definitively, it is clear that Raff composed four scherzi in the overall shape of a symphony.

In light of Raff's characteristic use of extremely rapid metronome markings in his Allegro movements it is interesting that this work does not have a real slow movement, but rather a slow moving scherzo disguised as a funeral march. To this must be added a specific *condition* of relative tempo. At a certain point, pulse and meter become perceived as *in one*, that is, not as individual beats, but as composite, bar-length pulses. Raff often indicates metronome markings that put the music right at the point of critical mass with respect to this sense of one-to-the-bar. At this subjective demarcation, tempo appears to be moving too quickly to enable focus on the individual beats of the measure. Certain varieties of rhythmic figures (i.e. dotted rhythms or running triplets or sixteenths) take on a breathless quality as if in the early stages of an amphetamine rush. The outer movements of the symphony sit within this description: they are too fast to be mere allegro, but too slow to be felt as real compound meter. Being appropriately ambiguous, the music of both movements takes on the forward motion of a slower than expected scherzo but with all the sparkle and mercurial felicity expected of one.

The outer movements also share certain common materials. The initial theme of the first movement (curiously marked *Allegro non troppo*, quarter = 160) is not brought back in the recapitulation but in the coda of the movement. It makes a fragmented appearance right at the opening of the fourth movement (*Allegro con spirito*, quarter = 200). Although the fourth movement is even faster than the first, the first movement's unrecapitulated main theme is given prominence by providing not only the shape of its materials but also in its direct restatement during the development and coda. There, the first movement's initial, dramatic D minor is transformed into ›mysteriously friendly‹ D major string tremolandi, buried, sul ponticello, in the midst of other fourth movement materials. At the end of the symphony it is brought back fully reconciled to its *scherzotic-heroic* D major which is a wholly normal Raffian contradiction. Why Raff would have expected his reviewers to be quick enough on the uptake to notice these thematic transformations and links is a mystery. Many of these are not at all apparent the first time through.

Formally, both the first and last movements are robust sonata forms replete with the logical twists and turns that are specific to Raff's very individual approach to form, harmony, instrumentation and thematic transformation. The first movement begins with a preview of the materials to come rather than an outright presentation of them. These anticipations resolve into a full statement of the main collection of D minor materials. Upbeat triplets play an important secondary role in the perpetual metamorphosis of the initial ideas. Secondary and, unexpectedly, tertiary materials are both contrasting (relative to each and to the opening) as they are in the ›wrong‹ key. In this case, rather than moving up to the relative major, F, Raff moves down to the submediant B flat major for *both* secondary themes. One of these, a broadly lyrical and internally chromatic idea punctuated with downbeat dotted rhythms which often subsume all

other materials, is offset by another wholly lyrical idea that is soaringly Brahmsian in character. It is, however, all Raff all the way through! The development takes this complex of ideas, even to the extent of giving much more exposure (either as textural filler or as thematic embroidery) to the triplet figures, and wrings what seems to be every possible permutation and transformation as can be gotten out of them. The recapitulation begins with the B flat major music now transposed to D major in a glorious moment of arrival! The second secondary idea follows in due course, also in D major. At its conclusion, however, the mood darkens and the tonic minor is reestablished by means of a secondary development as the movement moves to its conclusion. The first ideas return, but in further elaboration, not strictly speaking as recapitulation. The fourth movement follows similar procedures (three themes of which two are recapitulated followed by a peroration based on the opening theme of the first movement) but remains resolutely in the major mode throughout. It avoids the problems of unarticulatable rhythms resulting from its one-to-the-bar faster tempo by eschewing all rhythmic complexity.

The 2/4 B-flat major second movement, *Vivace* (quarter = 168), is the *official* scherzo of the work whose 429 measures fly by in a dizzying panorama of events in which constant, turn-on-a-dime shifts of perspective serve to define the virtuosity of the music. Interestingly, the head of the main theme, through which everything else is generated in one form or another, is derived from the first movement's first theme through extreme telescopic fragmentation. The movement combines elements of toccata moto perpetuo (but, as with the first movement, in one-to-the-bar pulses) with insistent ostinati, off-beat "oom-pah" accompaniments to four-bar-square dance tunes played "too fast", with passages of interlinear flying sixteenths and a taste of musical paprika in the folkloristic manner Raff would feature in his *Hungarian Suite*, Opus 194. An abbreviated E-flat major trio of Liedertafel simplicity (and at half the tempo by means of rhythmic augmentation) leads directly to a much shortened return of the main scherzo during which two increases in tempo end the movement in an exhilaratingly breakneck race for the double bar.

The most slyly subtle of the four scherzi is the third movement, the ›modern‹ D-minor funeral march which Raff marks *Larghetto, quasi Marcia funèbre* (quarter = 84). Just by the tempo and metronome markings alone one realizes immediately that we are being treated to a delicious bit of false advertising. *Larghetto* is a tempo marking that Raff typically uses for slow movements of a lyrical character. The metronome marking is hardly in keeping with the generally incorrect understanding of the term largo (or larghetto) which means broadly, not necessarily slowly. Taking into account the universal cliché of a funeral march as a dead on serious and emotionally laden affair, what is one to make of Raff's often parodical pompousness? In place of snare and tenor drum ruffles and flourishes, we get violas' and violins' bounced bows (i.e. *saltando*, or the German *springende Bögen*) along with cellos and basses imitating them. Absent is any haltingly mournful spirit à la Beethoven (*Eroica*), or Chopin (Opus 35/3), or Liszt (*Héroïde Funèbre*), or Mahler (5th Symphony). In its place we are presented with a crisp and *sprightly* tune bearing a remarkable resemblance both in spirit and substance to the Allegretto movement of the "Great" C major Symphony of Schubert (D 984). The tune is restated but with considerably altered and elaborated accompaniment. A secondary theme, again in B-flat major, providing a more substantial contrast (bouncing bowed

snare drums) gives way to more a more precisely punctuated version of the theme now overlaid with staccato sixteenths. The whole thing builds not to a shattering climax, but to an agitatedly majestic one. Our secondary theme returns in D major which builds to a second, even more pompous climatic moment complete with brass fanfares based on the opening theme. Things gradually fade away, and except for one last brief tutti, one does not have the impression of mourning as much as "official state ceremony". Both themes, now back in D minor, are heard simultaneously. The effect of the gathering and then dissipating texture is reminiscent of the third movement of Raff's *Lenore* symphony, except as if in slow motion. This is scherzo humor turned completely inside out - a subtle anticipation of Mahlerian irony. One easily imagines a fantastic Créole funeral procession transposed from New Orleans to Wiesbaden. Here a team of twelve Clydesdales pulls the elaborately decorated hearse bearing its hero composer as crowds line the narrow streets throwing their flowers at his bier while trumpets and trombones announce his arrival (presumably) at "a better place". One feels formal grandiloquence here, not sorrow. By comparison, the opening of the *Vor der Csárda* finale the *Hungarian Suite* is far and away more "pathetic" and mournful. The "funeral march scherzo" is a master stroke of inverted humor of the highest order. Till Eulenspiegel himself could not have met a nobler *and* wittier end!

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