

Joseph Joachim Raff

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

Symphony No. 11, op. 214 *Der Winter* (1876)

Largely on the basis his third and fifth symphonies (*Im Walde*, Opus 153 [1869] and *Lenore*, Opus 167 [1874]) Joachim Raff has often been categorized as a program composer. While seven of his eleven symphonies have descriptive titles and sub-titles, Raff eschews explicit programmaticism while playing fast and loose with the conventional forms he inherited as a German symphonist. The titles he places on these and other similar works are suggestive, not explicit – and his response, constructively, is to blur and distort structural principles (i.e. sonata form) to suit the suggestive nature of the music – the very thing the impressionists (beginning with Debussy) would do later on with very different musical syntax.

Although there is no evidence documenting Raff's *a priori* intention of writing a cycle of symphonies celebrating the seasons, in the Spring of 1876 he composed his eighth symphony, *Der Winter*, published later as No. 11, Opus 214. To compose a Winter symphony first may seem unusual until one recalls that Haydn prefaced his famous oratorio *Die Jahreszeiten* with a grim G-minor depiction of stormy Winter. The new symphony was not released for performance or publication, and was neither performed nor published during its composer's lifetime. In 1883 Raff's friend, the conductor Max Erdmannsdörfer, took the manuscript to C. F. W. Siegel's Musikalienhandlung in Leipzig where it was published in October of that year. Earlier, on 21 February, Louis Lüstner gave the posthumous premiere at a concert of the State Orchestra at Wiesbaden's Kurhaus. The remaining three symphonies Raff would write completed the undeclared cycle and were published and performed in his lifetime – *Frühlingsklänge*, Opus 205 (9th, published as No. 8, also 1876), *Im Sommer*, Opus 208 (10th = No. 9, 1878), and *Zur Herbstzeit*, Opus 213 (11th = No. 10, 1879).

It is likely that Erdmannsdörfer didn't >complete< the symphony (even though Siegel lists him as editor). His role was primarily to facilitate the score's publication as well as to prepare the four hand piano transcription that Raff would ordinarily have done himself. Raff's habit of disposing of his manuscripts after they were published makes it difficult to know how extensively *he* altered compositions before they went to press. This posthumously published work, whose original manuscript ALSO has disappeared, makes speculation about why it was withheld from publication all the more intriguing. Whilst the A minor symphony is consistent with its predecessors, Raff must have realized that with it he had pushed the rhetorical boundaries of the symphony into more ambiguous territory. As such he probably understood that because it did not follow the >expected< internal ebb and flow and sequence of events it might

have been best to let the work lie quietly awaiting, perhaps, a revision or a more auspicious time for publication. This never happened. Interestingly, three years later Raff composed four overtures based on Shakespearean plays that made a total break both dialectically and structurally with the standard sonata form models, indeed with the whole idea of motivic development. *Macbeth*, *Der Sturm*, *Othello* and *Romeo und Julia* did not appear without antecedents. The 8th, that is, Symphony No. 11, approaches the layout of its content with a similar attitude towards heterodox juxtaposition such as would be brutally stripped down in the later works.

Aside from the four movement layout, the most recognizable conventionality of the score is its instrumentation, which follows Raff's standard (2-2-2-2/4-2-3-0/Timpani, Triangle/Strings). The bleakness of the first movement, whose sonata form is more a tip of the hat to convention than anything else, is followed by a seemingly out-of-place Biedermeyer prettiness in the second that is not without its share of swirling darkness. The third moves without transition to an unusual mixture of Germanic fugal polyphony with Italianate barcarolle cantilena. The finale is an episodic rondo that suggests the worlds of film and ballet music, an early pre-echo perhaps of pieces such as the first and fourth tableaux of Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, or *La Befana* of Ottorino Respighi's *Feste Romane*. *Der Winter* seems close to *Aus Thüringen*, WoO 45 written the year before, or the *Italian Suite*, WoO 35 of 1871, yet Raff calls it a symphony. The aforementioned suites are each cast in five movements, however. The symphony's well disguised but steely inner logic, complete with cross movement thematic referencing, gives the whole internal unity. It is unquestionably Raff's most unusual and forward looking symphony, a musical travelogue celebrating in a freely associative manner the Winter season itself. Typically, Raff does not go to expected places at expected times. Its use of orchestral and harmonic color are key elements of the piece.

The first movement, *Der erste Schnee* (The First Snow) – [*Allegro*] – is typical of Raff in that it begins with bits and scraps which ultimately evolve into their final states, rather than being presented complete and then deconstructed in development. However, the plethora of pithy ideas, some appearing more >complete< whilst others remaining embryonic, enables Raff to shift the degree of importance of any given idea by as simple a method as juxtaposition. In the later Shakespeare overtures, juxtaposition will come to take the place of development altogether. In the present work, development and juxtaposition occupy positions of relative equality. On another level, the very episodic nature of the movement gives to it a stream-of-consciousness that could represent, musically, a kaleidoscopic view of a changing landscape as newly falling snow transforms its environment in almost random ways. Altogether, there are a total of six different thematic ideas that are stated during the 163 measure long exposition. There is no big statement in A minor, the tonic key. The first tutti of the work, although technically in C major, has more the effect of moving *towards* C rather than *being in it*. It ends, unexpectedly, in C minor. The entire exposition thus has an emotional symmetry that begins indefinitely, but with subdued angst which then moves to inconclusive brighter tonalities only to end with a *mélodie pathétique* and, of course, in the >wrong< key. The development of this material flits back and forth between its various ideas but largely in

muted colors – perhaps a sly programmatic reflection of the muting nature of falling snow, or the play of light on an emerging crystalline landscape. Constantly shifting and contradictory emotional states gives the whole a disturbing ambience. The recapitulation of the movement largely reverses the order of the original presentation while also providing the only really extended tutti of the movement. A sudden, abrupt (and decidedly proto-Sibelian) whirlwind coda is very much like a sudden orchestral snow squall.

The second movement, *Allegretto*, is untitled. This may have led some to believe that the symphony was left ›unfinished‹. It is equally plausible that Raff could not, or chose not to title it. Beginning as a formal yet glittery A major gavotte – it is built in square, blocky eight bar phrases that have the artificiality of a gilt-edged picture. The expected internal repetitions of this Baroque dance redux are replaced with a series of five colorful variations. The dramatic shift following the first movement is quite jarring if also a perfectly normal Raffian ruse that will tie the movement quite neatly, if paradoxically, to the first. A new idea is introduced in the fifth variation, a series of slithering diminished seventh chords followed by briefly squalling woodwinds recalling the close of the first movement. The variation proper moves to A minor, but with ever more insistent slithering strings (now tremolando) and woodwind squalls, the continuity established in the beginning is torn apart. Post-card prettiness becomes subsumed by harsh winter reality. Eventually the middle section of the movement emerges, a curious collection of simultaneities: piping flutes (as in the first variation), a sustained G tremolo in octave violins (borrowed from the opening of the first movement), a stolid chorale for bassoons, trumpets and trombones, and off-beat pizzicato harmonic underpinning. The resultant effect is markedly diffuse, more like a hymn heard from beyond. Although nominally in C major and without any orchestral peroration at all, in the aftermath of the slithering tremolandi and squalls that interrupt it, the chorale having resolved to C minor, dies away leaving a remorseful, Phrygian inflected A minor transformation of the opening which serves as a coda to the movement. A last minute conversion to A major is like a wink and a nod to the opening glitter, the closing of the door that shuts out winter's freezing bite.

The third movement, *Au Camin* (At the hearth), replaces the brittle glitter of the previous movement with a much warmer F major *Larghetto*. Here German polyphony (in the guise of a strict four part woodwind fugue) is overlaid on a gentle Italian Barcarolle strumming (in pizzicato strings). The device of overlaying music of conflicting textures, which plays a major role in Symphony No. 9, is one of Raff's favorite devices. There are two subsequent ideas, one which places the gentle piping of woodwinds (as in the previous movements) over flowing cantilena (a transformation of the fugal material), and another whose decidedly more passionate nature allows the music its first well earned climax. Embedded in all this are Raff's trademark tonal ambiguities and thematic displacements which enable him to move, Strauss like, all over the harmonic landscape without losing its fundamental sense of primary tonality. A brief coda lands in the dominant C major after which the piece begins all over again. This time the roles are reversed (invertible counterpoint *and* orchestration) and, following the order of their original statements, the three thematic threads are presented in fuller, more elaborate realizations. The tonal adjustments made in

this elaborated repetition keep the tonality focused in and around F major. For this reason the structure of the movement could be called a sonatina (exposition followed by recapitulation) such as the opening movement of Tchaikovsky's later *Serenade for Strings*. The kaleidoscopic shifting of textures and colors (both instrumental and harmonic) imbues the whole with a magic that is lyrical, gentle, and passionate by turns.

The finale, Allegro, entitled *Carnavale* has a decidedly Russian character. Its short-phrased, endlessly repeating folk-like themes and brilliant orchestration are reminiscent of the final movement of Tchaikovsky's second symphony (*Little Russian*). Here, as elsewhere, Raff employs the ›Glinka variation‹ technique where the principal thematic ideas remain unchanged as everything else changes constantly or is layered over with different, similarly static ideas. Raff transforms the rondo concept into a rapidly evolving whirlwind of events all of which are focused on exploiting every possible permutation of the initial set of ideas. Curiously, from the rondo perspective, the opening section itself contains a complete sonata-form exposition and development. Both ›first‹ and ›second‹ themes as such are built in accumulating layers, a simultaneity of ideas any one of which can be brought forward at any time like the first movement. The ›second‹ theme itself is an accompanied fugue procedurally reminiscent of the third movement. Rather than the expected full recapitulation, Raff suddenly shifts away to the first contrasting section, as a rondo, by changing meter and key from 4/4 A major to 3/4 F major, from high spirited festivities to coquettish minuet (with piping pre-*Nutcracker* flutes making yet another appearance). The return of the somewhat abbreviated initial section begins now in D major but ultimately moves back to A major. Its climax is broken by an outburst of sustained, ever sinister diminished 7ths (together with veiled thematic references to the first movement). The second contrasting section moves implicitly to 6/8, but also to E-flat major. Looking backwards to the third movement, the pleasant barcarolle is transformed into a furious tarantella. Although subdued at first, it builds quickly in a tremendous crescendo landing rather suddenly back in A major. We are given yet another transformation of the opening section only this time as preparation for the end of the piece, complete with a final reference to the very opening of the symphony presented in grand augmentation, and in the tonic major under the myriad layers of the other materials of the movement. This ultimate grand polyphonic celebration completely and affirmatively ends the symphony in the spirit of unqualified joy.

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