

Joseph Joachim Raff

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

Die Tageszeiten (The Times of Day) op.209 (1877) Concertante in four movements for choir, piano & orchestra

Conventional wisdom has it that Joachim Raff composed eleven symphonies, notwithstanding the fact that he actually wrote twelve and possibly thirteen of them. Preceding his 'official' First Symphony (*An das Vaterland*), Opus 96, completed in 1861, Raff in 1854 wrote a Grand Symphony in E minor, WoO 18, a work known to have been given at least four performances before its score was lost. Raff composed what was published as his Eleventh Symphony (even though it appeared in print only posthumously) prior to his Eighth, thus leaving the numbering of the last four symphonies completely askew. Conventional wisdom also has it that Raff composed nine Concerti for solo instruments and orchestra: three for Piano (although only one is called by the proper name of Concerto), four for Violin (although only two are called Concertos) and two for Violoncello (which are properly entitled Concertos). Finally, conventional wisdom has it that Raff composed six Orchestral Suites (all of them in five movements), two of which are rightly Concertos without being called such, and one of which is comprised of at least two movements from the original lost First Symphony.

One learns from this that Joachim Raff, while certainly exhibiting some respect for the received tradition that dictated conventions for the naming of pieces, had strong enough confidence in his creative imperatives to enable him to discard blind adherence to those conventions when his instincts led him elsewhere. His willingness to throw out the baby with the bathwater (while keeping a firm grip on the bathtub!) effectively led him into direct conflict with virtually all exponents of "advanced romanticism," even as it enabled him to predict with shocking precision many of the essential advances in compositional technique that would occur a century after him. Our recognition and numbering of both Raff's concerti and symphonies will need to be re-evaluated once again when an additional work is taken into account, the four-movement choral symphony *Die Tageszeiten* (The Times of Day), which he blithely referred to as a concertante - for mixed chorus, piano solo and orchestra, begun in 1877 and completed the following year.

The musical noun Concerto has a number of cognate derivatives: Concertino, Concert Piece, Concertante. The only thing all these words have in common is the fundamental concerto principle itself, that is, the use of one or more solo instruments pitted against a larger body of instruments (the Baroque relationship between concertino vs. ripieno). In Raff's day, the standard definition of 'concerto' required having a single soloist and an architectural form consisting of three movements in the temporal configuration Fast-Slow-Fast. Raff, however, never felt himself limited by that narrow definition, especially in light of his interests in the music of other periods. It was only natural for him, therefore, to explore the possibilities of applying earlier methods to contemporary syntactical and rhetorical constructs.

The general architecture of the purely instrumental 18th century symphony grew primarily in size and scope throughout the 19th century. The Choral Symphony, a form having a vocal component and, hence, a text imposing specific dramatic compositional demands, as contrasted with the purely abstract orchestral symphony, never established a set form. One need only compare the first three movements of Beethoven's revolutionary Ninth Symphony to its finale to see the problem immediately. The earlier Concert Fantasy, perhaps in some ways a sketch for this work, nevertheless offered another possibility by its alliance with the concerto principle. The Choral Symphony as first espoused by Beethoven, came to have many admirers and descendants all of whom are indebted to him to one degree or another.

It would seem inevitable that it should fall to Raff to devise the scenario in which the essential aspects of all forms of the symphony and the concerto would come together to create a hybrid exploiting the fundamental elements of both, taking sustenance not from the famous Beethoven

Symphony, but, rather, from Beethoven's far more radical, futuristic Concert Fantasy for Piano, Chorus and Orchestra, Opus 80. The resulting composition, *Die Tageszeiten*, Opus 209, was not referred to as either a symphony or a concerto, but a concertante. Laid out in four movements (fast - slow - scherzo - fast) which follow the general dramatic sequence of movements in the 19th century symphony, its individual structures have little to do with the conventions of symphonic construction - either as symphony or concerto - which is perhaps the reason Raff declined to identify it as a symphony per se (and despite the fact that there are hidden unifying thematic and motivic elements running throughout it - a characteristic more of the symphony than of the concerto). Beginning with an elaborate, pro-generative cadenza and containing many episodes typical of the concerto, the solo piano is not used consistently throughout the piece, thus seriously calling into question its standing as a concerto in the purest sense. The chorus, similarly, appears in all four movements, although it, too, is not necessarily the focus of attention.

What we have, then, is a construct made up of the primary elements of the symphony, concerto and oratorio arranged in such fashion that the usual declarative and connective tissue, the intermediate episodes and rhetorical devices, have been completely refashioned. Aside from Beethoven's Concert Fantasy, Raff's other principal formal antecedent would have been from Haydn's great oratorio, *Die Jahreszeiten* (The Seasons). From a procedural perspective, the first movement of *Die Tageszeiten* is no less than Raff's take on Beethoven's Choral Fantasy, even to its basic formal layout and its principal tonality, C major. Had it ended after only the first movement, *Die Tageszeiten* would be viewed as a latter-day descendant of Beethoven's earlier work. But, just as Haydn's oratorio had its four seasons, Raff built his concertante around four periods of the day, accordingly adding three additional movements, each shorter than the first even as their total duration is longer than the first movement alone. Telescoping Haydn's year into a single day, Raff also presents us one of his trademark, humorous paradoxes, and exhibits another prescient feature of his compositional method, compression, which in the last years of his life led him to some of the 19th century's most unusual experiments in form and content.

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Raff began the composition of *Die Tageszeiten* in 1877 in Wiesbaden and completed it 1878 in Frankfurt after he had assumed the post of Director of the newly-established Hoch Conservatory of Music. The work was first performed from the original manuscript on Monday, 12 January 1880 in Wiesbaden at the 4th Symphony Concert of the Royal Theater. The orchestra was conducted by Wilhelm Jahn with Karl Faelton as piano soloist. The Theater's resident choir sang the choral parts. The full score and piano-vocal rehearsal score (for the chorus) were published by Breitkopf and Härtel, Leipzig, in July of 1880.

Raff's daughter, Helene, who wrote the text of the work under the pseudonym Helga Heldt, in her memoir of her father's life written for the occasion of his 100th birthday in 1922, referred to it as a cantata! Helene was 17 years old when she wrote the text - a collection of bucolic country scenes and paeans to the common values of work and love more than a little reminiscent of Baron Gottfried Van Swieten's text for the Haydn oratorio written in 1801. It is a delicious conjecture to suggest that Raff might have put his poetess daughter up to the task of fashioning a libretto similar to Van Swieten's but in miniature - the times of the day in four movements, as opposed to the four seasons in four parts. Helene/Helga's text is quite polished and accomplished for one so young, but this is not so very surprising or unexpected for its time and place, given the education and support likely provided by her doting parents.

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From a strictly formal perspective, the first movement of *Die Tageszeiten* is the most elaborate. The opening piano cadenza (A capriccio), like the beginning of Raff's Suite for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 200, makes perfect sense from a 21st century perspective, in that it presents its thematic and harmonic ideas in an embryonic manner prior to giving them their crystallized, defined form. From a 19th century perspective, however, organizing the musical material in this fashion may have had the effect of seeming to begin the piece in the middle. The fragmentary nature of the musical narrative

and its insistence on a single motive gives the impression that it is the culmination of the development of a much longer musical idea, rather than the predictive statement of a theme not yet ready for full emergence. By placing this de facto development at the head of the work, Raff has allowed himself the freedom to make all kinds of suggestions and to engage in a wide range of musical innuendo. When it abruptly ends, it makes for the starkest kind of contrast through the presentation of a clear-cut, almost childish simple eight-bar theme which emerges with brilliant clarity. Raff was very fond employing this creatio ex nihilo device, the emergence of something out of the seeming chaos of nothing, the 'And there was light' moment (Haydn).

The new born theme is stated by unison strings, followed by a set of at least fourteen variations. It will later emerge that Raff is engaged yet again in one of his trademark deceptions: the theme and variations will ultimately be shown to be an elaborately disguised monothematic sonata form derivative in which the variations become longer and more involved, as would occur in the purely developmental episodes of a sonata form. It remains for the chorus' entrance later in the piece to complete the ruse.

The second movement, Andante, in 6/8 and F major is, on the surface, a calm and intimate answer to the bravado of the first movement. The gentle, barcarolle-like inflections in both the orchestra and the chorus are mitigated by the piano, which appears to function as a kind of interpreter between the two forces. It makes comment on both the orchestral and the choral statements, and seems to float above them, sometimes in its own world, totally divorced from them. At other times it seems to provide a lieder-like accompaniment to each. There is a superficial suggestion of tripartite form: a quiet opening, a more agitated central section, and a quiet conclusion. A simple bar count of the movement's 13 phrases reveals a very different picture, illustrated by the following graphic where O = Orchestra, C = Chorus, and P = Piano:

Phrase	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Ensemble	O	C-O	P	C-O	P	C-P-O	P-O	C-P-O	P-O	C-P-O	P-O	C-P-O	P-O
Bar count	21	14	14	21	21	14	12	18	28	14	7	18	18

Raff's avoidance of 8-bar phrases is immediately apparent. More striking, though, are the underlying pairings primarily in multiples of seven (7, 14, 21, 28) or of six (12, 18) -bar phrases. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10 and 11 by 7s; 7, 8, 12, and 13 by 6s; further, the sequence of 6 phrases of 7s followed by 2 of 6s is followed by 3 phrases of 7s answered by another 2 of 6s.) There are, of course, seven days in a week (the seventh being the Sabbath leaving six other days), and since the whole work is a poetic cycle about a single day, one senses a deeper, hidden structure and meaning behind its otherwise mild and gentle but clandestine, implicit animus.

The relative calm of the second movement is transformed in the third movement into a mysterious and almost creepy F minor Allegro (2/2), which provides an inverted view of the second movement's depiction of evening in the form of an agitated 'nighttime' scherzo that barely rises above piano. It is not made up of the kind of hobgoblin music that populates the scherzi of Raff's Symphonies N° 3, 8, 9, 10 and 11 being considerably shorter than any of them. Buzzing and swishing triplets in the strings, taken over at points by a piano part almost entirely comprised of measured figuration throughout, colorfully illustrate the central second couplet of the poem (English translation by Alan Howe; emphasis in italics by the present writer):

Nur die Schatten alles dessen,
Was uns froh und trüb gemacht,
Schleichen heimlich und vergessen,
Bis zur Ruh sie bringt die Nacht.

Only the shadows of everything
Which makes us glad and sad,
Creep secretly and forgotten
Until night brings them to rest.

Misterioso gives way to warmth in a comparatively brief trio (now in D flat major) which concludes in a virtual chorale. The piano and orchestra, without the chorus, return to an abbreviated and much transformed restatement of the opening in which the hot and cold elements of the movement come together. In the end, the piano is left alone with its sussurando of brittle, rushing triplets, before one last chorale-like cadence resolves to F major - but only at the very last moment.

With the passing of the warm evening and the cold night, dawn is now ready to break and a new day to begin. The dawn, in this case the opening of the fourth movement, resembles in miniature the portrayal of sunrise Raff wrote for the opening of his Eighth Symphony (*Frühlingsklänge* /Sounds of Spring) in 1877. In this concluding movement, the three elements (symphony, oratorio, and concerto) are most closely knit together. The principal theme of the first movement reappears here as an integral part, not simply as a cyclical reference point. Four quatrains constitute the text, and the musical setting divides, like the third movement, into 13 subsections. A somewhat higher-level view of the compositional structure, though, shows the movement to be divided into two equal parts, equal, that is, at least with respect to bar counts (and allowing for the fact that the tempo established in the first measure does not change until the work's coda). The first half accommodates the first three quatrains, whereas the second half is given over entirely to the fourth. Raff reserves his best pun for last: As the text provides an external 'statement of purpose', the succession of underlying tonalities of the four movements, C major - F major - F minor - C major, forms nothing less than an outline of the Dresden or plagal cadence - that is, it spells out "Amen".

Avrohom Leichtling, © 2009

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