

# Concert Review

## Scottsdale AZ, USA: Sunday 26 October 2008

by Alan H. Krueck

Having flown to Belgium several years ago for two performances of Joachim Raff's untitled Symphony No. 4 in G minor in Antwerp and Ghent respectively, flying from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Phoenix, Arizona to hear Raff's Symphony No. 10 in F minor (*Zur Herbstzeit* or At Autumn Time) aroused little hesitation in this Raff enthusiast. As with the Symphony No. 4, it was at last a chance in the advancing age of this reviewer to hear a live performance of Raff's 10th Symphony and, as it turned out, the performance marked the United States premiere of the work – not a mark of distinction for the US musical establishment. The symphony *Zur Herbstzeit* has always seemed to me the most perfect of Raff's four symphonies which make up the cycle of works reflecting the four seasons. Having once conducted *Der Winter*, this writer now waits with hope to hear before his death live renditions of *Frühlingsklänge* and *Im Sommer*, both of which have indeed been played in this country.

The orchestra involved in the performance of *Zur Herbstzeit* was Musica Nova of Scottsdale, Arizona and its leader is the accomplished Canadian born (Montreal) composer, arranger and conductor Warren Cohen. The orchestra is the largest of several ensembles covered by the name Musica Nova and conducted by Mr. Cohen. His philosophy in programming reflects his intrepid nature and focuses on serious musical works of considerable merit regardless of period or style. That Warren Cohen has such an organization to work with is little less than a miracle in today's relentless rehashing of standard repertoire. That is not to say that Musica Nova ignores standard repertoire, but it is safe to state that the oft-performed is judiciously balanced with genuine masterpieces neglected or forgotten. In that area, this writer can think of no other place in the world outside Scottsdale that continues season after season to maintain a performing organization of such foresight, integrity and professional caliber, for with the death of Jens Nygaard and subsequent demise of the Jupiter Symphony Orchestra, New York forfeited most of that distinction, though Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra do qualify, if not particularly in regard to Joachim Raff.

The visit to Scottsdale, Arizona was not without some unhappy revelations though they are only indirectly related to this review. They are mentioned here for naïve travelers going anywhere where they have never been. Phoenix is an air hub. Scottsdale is described as a suburb of Phoenix. Beware of hotel-motel accommodations listed as Phoenix/Scottsdale for Scottsdale as a suburb to Phoenix is like saying Newark, New Jersey is a suburb of New York City. You are in the American southwest and that means the wide open spaces: while technically accommodated in Scottsdale this traveler found out to his wallet's dismay that the trip from the hotel to the concert auditorium at Pinnacle Presbyterian Church in Scottsdale was a taxi fare of \$100 round trip. Public transportation in the area other than by taxi is limited and frustrating for it is assumed by the indigenous population that everyone has access to a car. The frustration is accentuated by the fact that Pinnacle Presbyterian Church - wonderful edifice which it is – is located along a stretch of (well traveled) desert road midway – and here's the rub – between "old" Scottsdale and "new" Scottsdale. Though sharing the same name they are literally separate domains, a fact a stranger is not likely to know beforehand. If you are alone and without a cell phone you are in for a bad time. So much for the caveats.

This writer was fortunately obliged with access to the Saturday rehearsal. The interior of Pinnacle Presbyterian Church offers compelling counterpoint to its handsome though bland reddish-brown sandstone exterior. Designed obviously for worship services pews and pulpit immediately indicate a church, for otherwise the eye registers performance area, with a magnificent large organ in full view behind the stage. When the orchestra was playing, the acoustic struck me as a bit overly reverberant, though nothing sounded muddy – indeed,

one gentleman considered the acoustics austere and dry. Whichever perception, the listener could distinguish all musical lines with genuine clarity and the orchestra blend came across just fine, as did the interplay between piano and orchestra throughout the Henselt Piano Concerto in F minor.

This writer was dumbfounded that the Sunday newspaper which he had purchased – The Arizona Republic – carried absolutely no mention of the Musica Nova concert, though listings for upcoming events at Pinnacle Presbyterian were displayed. The great focus of musical attention that day was the 2 PM concert of the Phoenix Symphony Orchestra and an appearance of pianist Lang Lang in Chopin's Piano Concerto No.1 in E minor (with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on the second half – groan!). Musica Nova's concert was at 4 PM. It was therefore no surprise to me that my count of heads came to 108 as Musica Nova began.

The opening work on the concert was most appropriate and satisfying: the *Festmarsch*, Op. 139 of Joachim Raff, conducted by Peter Carlston, a member of the organization who had won the management's annual lottery for guest conducting a work on one of the programs. Mr. Carlston certainly knew his job and Raff's *Festmarsch* came off with wonderful élan, a perfect indication of what could be expected in the expansive symphony which was to follow. As this person listened to the *Festmarsch* there was a feeling of great satisfaction that he was not sitting through another rendition of the overture to *Die Meistersinger*, for the *Festmarsch* is not a mere *piece d'occasion*, but a genuine symphonic edifice sporting yet another of Raff's memorable lyric melodies as contrast to the more festal sounds. Perhaps it is worth noting that Raff employs nothing but tympani as percussion, eschewing the expected raucous of cymbals, triangle, bass drum et al and it is doubtful that any audience member was anything but elated by the dignified exuberance of the piece delivered so superbly by the orchestra. One minor point of criticism: there were no printed program notes for any of the works on the concert, simply the listings and this was a bit unfortunate regarding the *Festmarsch*, since neither Peter Carlston nor Warren Cohen delivered any verbal observations on it.

That was not the case for the following work, the Concerto in F minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op.16 by Adolf von Henselt featuring pianist Janice Weber. Conductor Cohen delivered articulate and measured introductory commentary on the origin and history of the concerto before the performance began. Henselt's influence during his lifetime was and the fate of the concerto in the 20th century was reviewed, with Cohen noting that the last American public performance of the work seems to have been with the late Raymond Lewenthal during a 1975 romantic revival concert at Butler University (Indiana). Clara Schumann premiered the work and others performed it into the 20th century, though Henselt himself (reluctant public performer) never did. Henselt's position as literal piano czar of Russia because of his long years of employment in St. Petersburg not only benefited the sale of his reasonably small output of piano music but exerted profound influence on not only the techniques of major artists but also – clearly in the case of Rachmaninoff – on creative output.

For the exacting piano part in Henselt's concerto Janice Weber had flown in from her home in Boston to assist Warren Cohen once again in this major effort of revival, for a season previous she had played from memory the first piano concerto of Wilhelm Stenhammer with Musica Nova with staggering success. Janice Weber is still reasonably young and my assessment is that she is at top form as executant, a condition well documented by numerous recordings, my own favorite being that of Leo Ornstein's titanic piano quintet on New World. After the orchestral introduction to the *Allegro patetico* first movement Weber launched into the furious demands of this lengthy movement. I'm sure there was more than one person mesmerized by the disciplined command of the flowing cascades of notes under her fingers, of lovingly executed filigree surrounding Henselt's lyrical moments. Stamina is a major factor in the first movement and Weber had plenty of it while exhibiting poise that conveyed the very picture of ease - and the soloist is constantly playing throughout: not just simple runs and chords! Cohen and the orchestra provided exemplary accompanimental partnership in a most satisfying projection of the music

In the *Larghetto* second movement one expects a certain respite from preceding demands, but despite wonderful melody development for audience appeal, the sensitivity of the pianist is constantly confronted with subtle virtuoso demands which might throw off many a virtuoso in projecting the tenor of the movement. Not so with Janice Weber. Though there are outbursts in the movement, she managed to integrate them into the general expectations of a slow movement: a major feat considering the navigational demands of the figurations towards the end.

Pianists who have discussed the third movement *Allegro agitato* of this concerto have not held back comment on the super-human demands in its virtuosity: arpeggios which seem to require a second pair of hands to accommodate, not to mention the muscle tearing hand stretches. It all seemed like child's play to the indomitable Janice Weber and this listener felt his admiration for such human spirit swelling to the point of physical outburst which certainly was not held back as he joined the roaring of the crowd in its standing ovation. Henselt was gloriously served by Janice Weber and the marvelous support she received from Warren Cohen and the Musica Nova Orchestra. What a pleasure to have heard this magnificent and truly neglected Concerto in F minor for piano and orchestra by Adolf von Henselt so wonderfully projected. Hopefully other pianists and other orchestras throughout the world will help to restore this concerto to reasonable repertoire status. Certainly Janice Weber is a person to contact while waiting!

It was, of course, the performance of *Zur Herbstzeit* (At Autumn Time), the Symphony No. 10 in F minor, Op. 213 of Joachim Raff which attracted this writer to the Arizona desert. The performance eliminates now a lifetime wish to hear the work at least once in live performance (and the list still includes others like Felix Draeseke's *Symphonia Tragica* and Vincent d'Indy's Second Symphony in B-flat major, not to mention Raff's *Im Walde* and *Lenore* symphonies). If there are other conductors as capable and enterprising as Warren Cohen perhaps some of these wishes will be realized, but it also takes an orchestra management of sophistication and dedication to the concept that there is great music beyond the museum relics of ubiquitous standard repertoire. Cohen is indeed fortunate that the Musica Nova organization not only stands behind him but – so far – has been able to find the all important financial support needed for continued ventures.

That being said, this reviewer admits to a bit of apprehension about the performance of Raff's 10th Symphony when he arrived as the orchestra was rehearsing the third movement *Elegie*: the tempo struck me as dangerously languorous, particularly at the episode of which Tchaikovsky so fondly took advantage in the slow movement of his own Fifth Symphony. Apprehensions were raised as Cohen started the first movement and continued with a tempo slower than any to be encountered in the CD recordings. Spirits were raised (no pun intended) during rehearsal of the *Gespenster Reigen* (Ghostly Round Dances) where the enjoyment of the orchestra was apparent throughout. The fourth movement rehearsal also aroused some doubts, but not in regard to interpretation: there it was some unfortunately sloppy playing in the brass, the trumpets in particular, though the horns had a few bad blowings as well. With these impressions intact I had certain misgivings about the final product the next afternoon.

As the cliché goes: all's well that ends well and, I'm happy to report, *Zur Herbstzeit* came off beautifully at the public performance. Though this listener still found the tempo of the first movement too slow for his own taste, Cohen's idea about tempi did indeed facilitate appreciation of Raff's wonderful delineation of line in his orchestration. Climaxes and transitions were managed with logic and control: the *Eindrücke und Empfindungen* (Impressions and Sensations) of the movement's title were conveyed to the benefit of each listener's imaginative interpretation, though Cohen had made some choice suggestions in the spoken commentary which served as program information in lieu of printed notes. Raff's intuition in orchestral evocation of intent is marvelously mirrored by the general lightness of tone throughout this ravishing movement: it is only upon consideration of this that such reaction may be because Raff eliminates trombones in the movement. Cohen took the repeat which for this listener is a must. The slow tempo actually did gain a sense of the appropriate in the course of the music. The woodwinds of Musica Nova had particularly effective ensemble delivery throughout and the string sound was first class.

With Halloween just around the corner, Cohen's preliminary commentary played upon the spooky in the second movement, but was not overdone, especially since he artfully called the audience's to its palindrome design. For this listener Raff never wrote a bad scherzo and certainly *Gespenster Reigen* is at the top of the list. In it one is again taken by Raff's masterly sense of appropriate texture: a third flute (piccolo) is called for, trumpets are dismissed and trombones added. The gentle tympani tapping of the rhythmic first motive so genially answered by its gruff ascension through the lower strings finds irresistible extension in the dancing motive of the bassoons. As the movement unfolds it is difficult to imagine anyone not being swept along by Raff's thematic invention, invention which culminates after introduction of chorale like elements in one of Raff's most glorious melodies – each your heart out Brahms! As the movement continues to fulfill its arch design, the instrumentation grows ever more felicitous. The woodwind counterpoint of *Musica Nova* was absolutely virtuosic with Cohen beautifully balancing textures on the way to the pianissimo conclusion.

*Elegie*, the third movement, is an incomparable masterpiece of lyricism beyond verbal description. Written after the premiere of the symphony to replace the original slow movement (in itself a fine piece, though only published in 2003 as a separate *Elegie*) ostensibly because of considerations fostered by his wife. This replacement, in which heavy brass and tympani are absent, unfolds with ever increasing passion throughout its basic three episodes. It was with this movement that this critic had the greatest apprehension, since the tempi chosen by Cohen at the rehearsal the preceding day could have proven calamitous. How wonderful it was to note a more appropriate tempo in the public performance: there was no radical alteration, simply enough of an adjustment to allow Cohen's interpretation of the music to find its justification. The strings responded gloriously, the blend with woodwinds faultless, the climaxes true catharses: the movement truly fulfilled.

Even the most dedicated Raff advocate cannot deny that Raff's orchestral finales can occasionally be a letdown after movements of pure genius in a work. One may choose for oneself which to cite, but the finale to *Zur Herbstzeit, Die Jagd der Menschen* (Men on the Hunt), is definitely not one of them and it is basically the reason why this listener has found *Zur Herbstzeit* the most satisfying of the symphonies in Raff's seasons cycle. Again Raff's subtitles for the section divisions of the movement, *Auszug, Rast, Jagd, Hallali, Rückkehr* (Departure, Rest, Hunt, Hunting Calls, Return) are suggestive and one may envision any descriptive aspects one wishes as did Warren Cohen in his pre-performance introduction of the symphony, offering, among other ideas, a picture of galloping horses and barking-yapping dogs as the orchestra races headlong throwing off grace note accentuations (starting just after letter N in the score) – had never thought of it myself, but enjoyed the idea! The movement is perfect in its length with well judged episodes of invention and contrast. The *Musica Nova* players seemed to enjoy themselves and in this finale Raff employs the orchestra with full complement of brass. It was both a joy and relief that apprehensions aroused at the Saturday rehearsal were completely dispelled by the note perfect and rousing delivery of the brass fanfares which conclude the movement. Warren Cohen and the *Musica Nova* orchestra had done themselves proud and the audience rewarded them with bravos and a standing ovation of sincere enthusiasm. The only disappointment for this reviewer is that so few people were introduced to this masterpiece of Raff at its North American premiere, appropriately offered *Zur Herbstzeit*!

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