

## JOACHIM RAFF

David C F Wright, PhD

Like Brahms, the Swiss composer Joseph Joachim Raff objected to the German movement known as the music of the future. Traditional ideas were his brief, and, therefore, he was somewhat against Liszt, Wagner and the 'moderns', and on the side of Schumann and Brahms.

Yet it is said that Raff orchestrated some of Liszt's works at Weimar but that is a matter of debate. The very stupid feud with letters of invective passing between musicians and their supporters and inflammatory articles in newspapers and other journals, in which Raff took a vitriolic part, was ill-advised. Schumann founded 'David's club' in 1834 to fight, what he called, musical philistines.

Raff is generally only really known for his famous Cavatina, Op. 85 no. 3, yet he wrote eleven symphonies, two concertos each for violin and cello respectively, a piano concerto and several chamber works and songs. He also wrote operas

Fortunately his concertos, symphonies, piano trios and quartets are now available on CD.

Raff was born in Lachen on Lake of Zurich on 27 May 1822. His father was Franz Joseph Raff from Wurttemberg who, during the Napoleonic Wars, had fled to Switzerland to avoid being called up to fight just as Britten and Pears were to do when the Second World War threatened. Raff senior literally went into hiding. He eventually became a teacher in Lachen. Joachim's mother was Swiss.

Franz Raff was both a very strict schoolteacher and father and was positively disliked by most of the children. While there is no evidence of cruelty, there is evidence of his competence and his devotion to humanism with its liberal human values and disregard of religion and its concepts.

When young Raff was twelve years old, he was sent to school in Rottenburg close to where his father had lived. He then attended the Jesuit Lyceum of Schwyz earning first prizes in German, Latin and mathematics. He also became a schoolmaster. He had taught himself the piano and had begun to compose and sent his first compositions to Mendelssohn who, in 1843, recommended some be published by Breitkopf and Haertel and Mendelssohn wrote to that publishing firm to say so. Mendelssohn described the works as elegant and flawless. Raff gave up his teaching profession and pursued music and was reduced to poverty and Mendelssohn was a great source of encouragement.

During 1844 and 1845, Raff wrote his Grande Sonata in E flat minor Op. 14 for piano which originally ended with a fugue. It is good in parts but there is too much tinkling at the top of the piano and, in the larghetto third movement, there is a series of ascending notes which are all trills and this becomes tedious. A more ambitious work is the Suite no 4 for piano Op 91, which dates from about 1859. The Fantasia and Fugue owes a lot to Bach and is somewhat florid and academic although the theme is memorable. There follows a Gigue with Variations, an introspective Cavatina and a successful March finale.

His Grand Quintet, his Piano Quintet, Op 107 is an excellent chamber work

His Piano Concerto in C minor Op 168 was composed between 1870 -73 and dedicated it to Hans von Bulow who premiered it in Wiesbaden on 30 March 1873. It was a success and played throughout Europe and in the major cities in the USA. Raff spoke of this work as a painter would design one of



his works. The concerto has a flow of melody and the second movement is a beautiful reverie and the finale recalls the first movement and leads to a brisk march.

Another fine chamber work is the Sextet for two violins two violas and two cellos completed in 1872 as Op 178 and premiered at a private soiree in Sondershausen on 13 December 1872.

He arranged Bach's solo cello suites for piano but one cannot see the sense in that neither value the assumption of harmonies he used.

Raff met Mendelssohn in Cologne in 1846 and would have studied with him but Mendelssohn died the following year. It has been said that Raff's music is Mendelssohnian but without the grace and refinement.

In 1845, Raff met Liszt having walked for two days in the pouring rain to attend a recital. whom, at first, he admired greatly. The feud that would engulf Raff later was years away when Raff found his mentor to be overpowering. Liszt was the greatest pianist of his and of all time. He could sight-read the most challenging works without difficulty. But Raff's walk of 80 kilometres in the rain from Zurich to Basle to hear Liszt play was an important turning point in his life.

Raff continued to study at home and at Stuttgart where he met von Bülow who took up his Concertstück for piano and orchestra and performed it on 1 January 1848.

King Arthur was composed in Stuttgart in 1847 and this opera was later reworked and first performed on 9 May 1851.

The young composer became engaged to Doris Genast in 1856. She was the daughter of a well-known actor. He followed her to Wiesbaden where they married in 1859.

Liszt had come to the rescue of the young man in his financial difficulties and employed him as his secretary from 1850 to 1856 in Weimar. In gratitude Raff took up the Lisztian cause of the New German Music, the music of the future. He was employed in writing out parts, entertaining the increasing number of people in Liszt's society and friends and hangers-on. He also composed and wrote textbooks which revealed that he was a progressive musician. It is said that Raff orchestrated Liszt's tone poems Prometheus and Tasso but this has been the subject of debate.

But in 1854 he made a very big mistake. He wrote a book entitled 'The Wagner Question'. Wagner was in Liszt society and no one considered that there was any question or debate about Wagner and his genius. And so from within the camp was this treatise by a 32 year old who was dependent on this group in which Wagner was criticised. Not all that was written was criticism. In fact Raff admired much of Wagner's work.

Raff was given the cold shoulder in Weimar and his happy relationship with Liszt suffered. This is why Raff left Liszt in 1856 to become freelance, moving to Wiesbaden where he lived for the next twenty-one years. Liszt had tried to get Raff a patron in Vienna by the name of Mecchetti but he died when Raff was on his way to meet him.

The life of a freelance composer is precarious. Even more so when there is a cloud hanging over you. He had little success at first.

In 1859 his Suite no 4, Op 91 appeared. It is a magnificent work of heroic proportions with a Fantasia and Fugue, a Giga with Variations, a Cavatine and a March

Things changed in the 1860s.

He had already had two string quartets written, the first is a very fine work. He was to write another six although the last three are described as Suites and number seven is described as after Wilhelm Müller's *Die Schöne Müllerin*.

It was time to write a symphony and in the 1890s and 1870s he was regarded as the finest symphonist of his time.

His Symphony no. 1, *An des Vaierland*, op. 96, appeared in 1863 and the Symphony no. 2 in C, op. 140, appeared in 1869. Both are competent and enjoyable. The symphony no.1 is in five movements lasting just under 70 minutes and has been compared to Smetana's *Ma Vlast*. It falls historically between the uprising of 1848 and the unification of Germany under Bismarck in 1871. The fourth movement quotes Reichard's melody for the song *Was ist der Deutschen Vaterland* and seem to establish the unity of the fatherland. The first movement tries to emulate the German character, A fine scherzo make sup the second movement and the third is a larghetto with a prominent part for solo cello.

The Symphony no 2 is mainly confident and pastoral as shown in the outdoors opening movement. The second movement has a sort of contemplative religious character and the third is delicately scored and has been said to depict wildlife in the forest. The finale eventually becomes somewhat boisterous.

People took notice of his Symphony no. 3, *Im Walde*, (In the Forest), Op. 153, premiered in 1870 and which was heard throughout the musical world in a space of a few years. Even New York welcomed it. But it is not a successful symphony in some aspects. It is inspired by nature and is often delicate and lacking in drama and tension. The first movement is entitled *Impressions and Feelings*, the second *Dreaming and Dance of the Dryads* and the finale depicts the stillness of the night. The music is somewhat anaemic.

This year also saw the completion of his comic opera, *Dame Kobold*.

The impressive Symphony no. 4 in G minor, Op. 167 dates from 1871. It starts with a threatening and solemn style which eventually has a cheerful climax, but the music stops and starts. The scherzo is in E flat and ABA form. The third movement is lyrical and has some drama while the finale harks back to the first movement and has a good climax.

Also in 1871 came another fine piano work, the *Fantasie Sonata Op 168* in one movement with three sections, an allegro, a largo and a bravura allegro molto.

The Symphony no. 5, *Leonore*, Op. 189, was first performed in 1872 and was equally a success. It is a splendid piece with a magnificent march. The orchestration is excellent. It is based on the Gothic tale of Leonore awaiting the return from war of her beloved Wilhelm and invokes the happiness that they share. Even in the finale they are reunited in death. The work is probably a little overlong but contains much pleasing music.

His circumstances now meant that he could devote himself to major works rather than churn out little piano pieces for people and their children who had the money to commission a small piece to be written for them. But then a composer has to work to receive an income and it is not always realised that supply and demand was the rule of the day.

His first concerto, the *Violin Concerto no. 1 in B minor*, Op. 161 was written and followed by a *Piano Concerto in C minor*, Op. 185, the *Cello Concerto in D minor*, Op. 193 and the *Violin Concerto no. 2 in A minor*, Op. 206. Of special recommendation is the *Violin Concerto no 1*, a very attractive work, sometimes as sweet as Bruch's *Violin Concerto no 1*.

The Symphony no. 6, Op 189 of 1876 has a curious title Lived, Strived, Suffered, Quarrelled, Died and Wooded. It has been said that this was a heroic statement proclaiming triumph over suffering or it represents the fate of an artist. It was not altogether popular at first although the scherzo was acclaimed. As for me, I find it his best symphony so far. The opening movement is impressive with its fast, frenetic music which is exciting. The scherzo is marked Vivace and the third is a lugubrious funeral march but is never banal or dreary despite its dealing with the death of the artist. The finale is a celebration and often impressive I am not convinced that this titles and descriptions of the music is helpful. It makes them out to be narrative as symphonic poems.

Chamber music poured from his pen and he was gaining a reputation among the people that mattered. His piano trios are generally fine and the first has a scintillating piano part. His violin sonatas are very fine and examples of fresh air and his String Quartets have quality and to ignore them is folly.

In 1877, he was appointed director of the new Hoch Conservatory at Frankfurt- am-Main. To be the first director of a music college was some responsibility. He had to appoint faculty members. He appointed Clara Schumann and Julius Stockhausen of the Schumann-Brahms party and, to balance his appointments, engaged Joseph Rubinstein of the Liszt-Wagner party.

But this was his second big mistake.

Quarrels flared up between the opposing factions. Stockhausen resigned and the new conservatory was soon in disarray.

His Symphony no 7 Op 210 dates from 1875 and is a combination of both powerful and feeble music often cheerful and sometimes unconvincing flippant The Symphony no 8, Op 205, dates from 1876 and is entitled Sounds of Spring which has a memorable opening theme but about nine minutes we have some silly music. The second movement is lively and brilliant and the orchestration is superb. The slow movement is tender and, later, playful. The finale may not be altogether successful.

The next symphony is the second of the four that deals with the seasons.

This is Symphony no 9, Op 208, and it is a gem. It is lovely music and also pastoral without the extremes of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. Raff captures the shimmering sun, the peaceful countryside and there are some luxurious instrumental solos. Often the music has a gentle and intimate feel as if two lovers are walking hand in hand. The first movement describes a hot day of lazy heat in what is basically a rondo. The second movement is entitled The Hunt of the Elves which is a fleet footed scherzo inspired by Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream where the cello solo represents Oberon. The next movement is an Églogue an evocation of pastoral life in which a shepherds' pipe is heard across the meadow. The finale is a life-affirming piece giving thanks for the harvest.

There is a real charm and elegance about this highly personal music. A friend remarked that it was like a tender love story.

The revised Grande Sonata in E flat minor retains its opus number as 14 and appeared in 1881. It replaces the earlier version being in the original key and in four movements and was very popular in its day. It is not a showy virtuoso work but very attractive, melodious, polyphonic and highly contrapuntal. A forceful allegro is followed by a devilish Allegro molto a hymn like Larghetto and a cheerful finale.

Raff was an arrogant and disagreeable man. However, to his credit, he did not use his position to feather his own nest by concentrating on performances of his own works. He was not an Elgar or a Britten. Raff had no ambition to promote himself.

Probably his most famous pupil was the American Edward MacDowell who was born in New York in 1860. He went at first to the Paris Conservatoire in 1876 before going to Raff in 1879. Like Raff, he is only remembered by a piano piece *To a Wild Rose*. Like Raff, he was to become the first musical director of a music department – in his case, Columbia University, New York. Sadly, he was knocked down in a street and for the last three years of his life he was insane. He died in 1908.

The MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire was established in his memory.

MacDowell tried to start a revival of Raff's music after the Swiss composer's death but to no avail. A curious and fascinating work was begun in Wiesbaden in 1877.

It is not a symphony or a concerto but described as a *Concertante* for piano, chorus and orchestra and eventually had the opus number as 209. The text was written by Raff's daughter Helene under the pseudonym Helga Heldt and is a hymn of praise to the countryside the value of work and love. There are four movements lasting about 40 minutes and was entitled *Die Tageszeiten*.

Generally speaking, in those days, a concerto or concertante was usually confined to one soloist although such composers as Mozart and Beethoven deviated from this path. Whether this Raff work is successful is a matter of opinion, of course, but it is an interesting work.

Raff was an accomplished pianist and able to compose some fine music. If his music has faults it is in that sometimes it is merely businesslike and some of his music is expansive, inactive and thin.

But he kept composing. *Symphony no. 9, In Summer*, op 208 appeared in 1880 closely by *Symphony no. 10, Zer Herbstzeit*, Op 213. The *Symphony no. 11, Der Winter*, op 214 was unfinished at his death and was completed by Erdmannsdoerffer.

His last four symphonies represent a series denoting the four seasons. these last two symphonies strike more as serenades than symphonies as is a light heartedness approach was preferable. this may also explain why many of his large piano works are called suites so that sonata form would not have be observed or expected. The *symphony no 10 Autumn* has some good moments and a spirited final but it is one of those works that, is good in parts and not consistent but the there are very many works like this. The same can be said of the *Symphony no 11, Winter*, although it has a striking finale as does it predecessor.

Ebenezer Prout, a rather stuffy music theorist, wrote of Raff's symphonies "has melodies for the most part simple and very appreciable and sometimes ear catching to a degree but that borders on the commonplace."

Raff died suddenly on 25 June 1882 in Frankfurt. He was sixty years old. Some have said that he died from overwork. In his final years, his popularity had waned.

He was an interesting composer and, at times, a great one and deserving of the recent interest in his music but. like many others, he wrote too much.

I could write much more but there is an excellent website devoted to Raff and I highly recommend it.

This article was originally written in 1997 and other people have used the wording which I have used in their subsequent articles and without permission.

(3015)

---

© Copyright David C F Wright 1997 updated 2009 and 2014. This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.