

Joseph Joachim Raff

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

Orchestral Prelude to Shakespeare's "The Tempest" WoO.49 (1879)

Orchester-Vorspiel zu Shakespeare's "Sturm"

Even the most cursory appraisal of Joachim Raff's catalogue of nearly 300 works places a healthy percentage of them within the realm of "program music." Within his orchestral works we have two exemplary examples of the program symphony in #3 (*'Im Walde'*) Opus 153 (1869) with a narrative outline provided by Raff himself (and which proved to be one of his most popular and frequently performed works) and #5 (*'Lenore'*), Opus 177 (1873) (after the poem of August Bürger). In both of these works, Raff hews closely to the dramaturgical outlines of his extra-musical source materials even while remaining true to the underlying structure of the four movement symphony. Without reference to their literary sources, however, one perceives works of a highly dramatic nature strictly under the control of tightly organized form and rhetoric. Raff's keen sense of formal projection never permits any one element (microscopically) or overall movement thrust (macroscopically) to go on longer than is necessary to establish the point before moving on to the next one. In this sense, Raff's approach is frequently at variance with the late 19th century's growing obsession with excess in all aspects of composition.

However in the other symphonies we encounter titles without any clues as to their implications for form or content. The subtitle of the *Sixth Symphony*, Opus 189 (1874), (*"Gelebt: Getsrebt, Gelitten, Gestritten - Gestorben - Umworben"*) is more emblematic than programmatic. The *Seventh Symphony* (*"In den Alpen"*), Opus 201 (1875), like the four seasons symphonies which were to follow, has individual descriptive titles for each of the movements. But there are no other narrative clues anywhere to be found in them, thus keeping within Raff's generally compressed *modus operandus*: implication and suggestion - a fundamentally impressionist sensibility. Only the *9th Symphony*, Opus 208 (1878) (*"Im Sommer"*) contains a passing reference to anything literary, and here the seasonal reference is itself a reference to a reference. The scherzo of the 9th lists Oberon and Titania of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both in one of the movement subtitles, as well as in the score itself. Otherwise the '...summer' of the title is the only thing explicitly seasonal about it (aside from the subtitles themselves: *Ein heisser Tag, Die Jagd der Elfen, Ekloge, Zum Erntekranz!* In the scherzo movement a solo viola is labeled 'Titania' and a solo cello is labeled 'Oberon.' Curiously, the complete subheading for the scherzo is a virtual miniature program even though its original title was simply *"The Love-Song of Oberon and Titania"*. For the rest, one is left to ponder possibilities and probabilities, not absolutes and set narrative. The last of the symphonies (in order of composition), *Symphony #10* (*"Zur Herbstzeit"*), Opus 213 (1879), has an elliptically epigrammatic rhetoric that is closer to the later impressionism of Debussy or even more so to Sibelius although its language is still fundamentally German. This symphony bears a close spiritual relationship to *The Tempest* and to its three companion works.

On balance Raff's aesthetic resembles Beethoven's famous aphorism *Mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Mahlerey*. That Raff produced a wide range of musical literature provides a clue to his eclectic approach to composition which was as varied in its ways and means as in its external forms. Raff's stylistic heterodoxy both set him distinctly apart from his contemporaries as it affords listeners well over a century after his death the opportunity to experience the late 19th century from a very different perspective than has, through the ossification of the performing repertory, heretofore been possible. Raff can easily be seen as

a composer who, although he worked within *certain* conventions of the language of his time, was well ahead of his time in many signal ways.

Interestingly there is not a single instance of the symphonic poem to be found in Raff's vast output. The closest Raff came to the form are found in the four Vorspiele to plays of William Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, WoO 49, *Macbeth* WoO 50, *Romeo and Juliet*, WoO 51, and *Othello*, WoO 52, all of them written in 1879 (and thus contemporaneous with *Zur Herbstzeit*), during his tenure as director of The Hoch Conservatory of Frankfurt.

At his death in 1882, Raff left a number of unpublished and unperformed compositions. Even though *The Tempest* and *Macbeth* were performed during his lifetime (*The Tempest* on 4 February 1881 in Weisbaden conducted by Louis Lüstner, one of Raff's most consistent champions, and *Macbeth*, similarly, under Lüstner almost a year later on 13 January 1882), *Romeo und Julie* was not premiered until a year and a half after Raff's passing, again conducted by Lüstner in Wiesbaden on 4 January 1884. It was later performed in London conducted by Hans Richter. *Othello* would have to wait until the late 20th century for a first hearing.

In 1891 Raff's former pupil, the American Edward MacDowell, arranged for the publication of *Romeo and Macbeth* by Arthur P. Schmidt, the Boston based publisher who also maintained offices in Leipzig. Schmidt, possibly on instruction from MacDowell, printed the title pages listing the four works as "*Four Shakespeare-Ouverturen*," even though Raff uses the term "Orchester-Vorspiel zu... ." Assuming the term "Overture" was not Raff's its use doubtless arises from the fact that the English words *Prelude* and *Overture* are effectively synonymous, even though an overture is not necessarily a prelude to a play or an opera. Raff's use of the term Vorspiel suggests that he wanted to deflect direct association with the symphonic poem tradition. MacDowell, who was nineteen years old when these pieces were written, and thirty-one when The US Library of Congress recorded the copyright in his name, doubtless understood the special nature of the four vorspiele, sensing in them something considerably more than mere preludes - and this may explain his choice of the word Overture.

Given the universal acceptance of the Schlegel-Tieck translation of Shakespeare (1833) in German speaking lands, Raff's use of Shakespearean subject matter was common enough for its time. However the architectural designs of the four preludes set them apart from all the symphonic poems of the day.

The *Four Shakespeare Overtures* were probably not intended as an integrated piece inasmuch as their collective structure bears no resemblance to the internal organization one expects from a multi-movement work even as they share a number of common characteristics. All four are allegro movements whose principal tempi do not, by and large, change to any significant degree. Forward motion is maintained from the initial tempo even as the materials of the moment change kaleidoscopically to shift the dramatic focus from character to character or situation to situation. From a slight shift in perspective this straight ahead allegro echoes Hans von Bülow's observation that "*with Raff, things tend to move rather quickly.*" While one could characterize this approach as "objective romanticism" the fact remains that Raff wastes no time lingering over details.

Similarly, the four overtures are constructed out of a multiplicity of thematic fragments in which the developmental concept of extension by elaboration and transposition is largely replaced with fragmentation and juxtaposition. It would not be stretching the point to suggest that Raff's extremely episodic and telescoped architecture, especially in *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*, anticipates the entire world of film music - a remarkable achievement

considering the 1879 date of composition. From purely structural and event driven perspectives, neither *Macbeth* nor *The Tempest* have anything at all to do with “current trends” in the 19th century.

The overtures, collectively, represent a distillation of the compositional methods previously developed in the symphonies. Where most of his contemporaries were completely devoted to the general rhetorical concept of expansiveness in all aspects of composition, Raff went in the opposite direction towards compression, that is, an explicitly telescopic attitude towards dramatic architecture.

Thus, for example, although Berlioz wrote a 95 minute long symphony on the subject of *Romeo and Juliet*, and while Tchaikovsky's tone poem merely lingered over their love music as much as he exploited the conflict between the Capulets and the Montagues in a relatively straightforward sonata form movement, at less than half Tchaikovsky's duration (and 1/10th of Berlioz), Raff's *Romeo & Julie* is more a situational sketch than a transformation of the dramatic arch of the play into its musical analogue. Its brevity is breathtakingly Webernesque by comparison. *Othello*, which is somewhat longer in Raff's reincarnation is similarly involved more with the overall situation of the Othello - Desdemona - Iago conflict. Its generative opening vacillation between D-major and A-flat major belongs to the world of Holst, Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky. When considering Raff's representations of *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*, the shapes of Shakespeare's plots are more clearly in evidence if only as function of their greater length. However, in the case of *Macbeth*, with its stolidly stubborn C minor, we are given twelve completely self contained thematic character portrait fragments which are batted about mercilessly over the course of its 350 measures as if reflecting the moment to moment changes in some highly compressed, expressionist film! In the case of *The Tempest*, whose plot is more complex and diffuse, there are eight identifiable character (or circumstantial) portraits. However, owing to its greater overall length when compared to *Macbeth* (517 versus 350 measures, or a 40% increase) *The Tempest* at least contains a few episodes that are more clearly “developmental” in nature as opposed to juxtapositional. On balance, *Macbeth* takes *The Tempest's* rhetorical method and considerably distills and telescopes it.

Raff begins right off with an aggressive storm in G minor made up of a two fragment ostinato. There is no theme, but rather there are thematic gestures, as if the piece begins in the middle of a development whose materials have already been fractured beyond recognition. After 53 measures, the storm abates as the music brightens to G major and we are given a portrait of Prospero who will later be revealed as the Duke of Milan. His chorale theme is presented first by the brass alone, and then in a more elaborate repetition by the rest of the orchestra. Towards its end, the fleet, mercurial C-major music associated with Ariel begins to poke through and, at measure 91 takes over completely. Buried in the figuration is a more lyrical counter-melody that will become more prominent later on in the piece. At measure 117, music associated with the love of Ferdinand and Miranda is presented. Like Prospero's music, Ferdinand and Miranda's portrait is in two parts. The first is rather unexpectedly in A-flat major, the second, like Prospero's two-fold statement, is more elaborate and even more unexpectedly in E major. At measure 168, the tonality rudely shifts to C minor and we are given a portrait of Caliban (or perhaps more generally the mischief he and other characters in the play represent). At this point, the exposition of five of the eight thematic portraits is over even as one has flowed directly into the other with hardly anything but the most minimal of transitions.

After an episode involving Prospero and Ariel's motives (mm 185-196), the sixth fragment, perhaps representing perhaps Ariel's sleeping spell, leads back to a brief restatement of the storm music. At measure 218 we meet King Alonso (the seventh portrait), and shortly

afterwards, the conspirators (the eighth) who first appear, appropriately enough, in a twisted and rhythmically ungrammatical fugue. From this point until measure 433, all of the above mentioned portraits and motives are tossed about, fragmented and juxtaposed as if in representation of dialogue or action even as the complex plot of the play is more difficult to represent abstractly. The few recognizable developmental episodes only occur halfway through this latter section.

Ultimately, though, as the drama is resolved - when Ferdinand and Miranda's wedding plans are blessed, when Prospero is granted permission to return as Duke of Milan, and when Caliban is forgiven his misdeeds does the music finally shift into a totally different realm. Perhaps as a gesture towards Shakespeare's time, the piece takes on a pronounced retrograde aspect through its transformation into music that resembles a 17th century ceremonial dance (if heard with 19th century ears). Raff's orchestration is particularly interesting here with its wind scoring and internal registrational inversions and high doubling piccolo (imitating a recorder over a band of krumphorns and other period wind instruments). The music quickly develops into a full orchestral peroration, which at its conclusion fades away. The violence of the storm gives way to a "calm sea and prosperous voyage" - all in G major!

The chart given below lays out the eight thematic portraits and shows how they are welded together, moment by moment. Clearly when only a measure or two of a given theme is given, it is only the head of the idea that is presented. Having heard the whole thing once, it is enough (in Raff's general approach) to be reminded of it as the musical argument goes forth. Or, if you will, consider this a cue sheet for a highly condensed yet spectacular film production of *The Tempest*:

Motive	Description	Begin	End	Tonality	Comment
I	Storm	1	53	G minor	4/4 (2/2) throughout
II	Prospero	54	90	G major	
III	Ariel	91	116	C major	
IV	Ferdinand & Miranda	117	168	A-flat major, then E major	
V	Caliban and mischief	168	184	C minor	
III	Ariel	185	186	G major	
II	Prospero	187	190	G major	
III	Ariel	191	192	C major	
II	Prospero	193	196	C major	
VI	Magic Music	197	204	C -> E flat -> G flat	
I	Storm	205	218	E flat -> G minor	
VII	King Alonso	218	236	F major	
VIII	Conspirators Fugue (Stefano, Trinculo, Caliban)	237	254	D minor	
III	Ariel	255	256	E flat major	
VIII	Conspirators Fugue (Stefano, Trinculo, Caliban)	257	258	Towards A flat	
III	Ariel	259	260	E major	

VIII	Conspirators Fugue (Stefano, Trinculo, Caliban)	261	265	Towards A	
III	Ariel	266	267	G major	
VIII	Conspirators Fugue (Stefano, Trinculo, Caliban)	268	269	D towards F	
III	Ariel	270	271	F major	
VI	Magic Music	272	275	Initially C	
V	Caliban and mischief	275	287	D flat inverted embellishment to C minor	by transition followed by statement
II	Prospero	288	293	G major	interspersed with III (289, 291)
III	Ariel	293	295	G major	
V	Caliban & conspirators	296	328	Ambiguous – Bb minor – E flat minor – dim. 7th blur towards F	the only extended developmental episode
II	Prospero	329	332	F major (6-4)	
VII	King Alonso	333	346	F -> B flat towards D	
III	Ariel	347	354	D major	by augmentation of the counter melody
VII	King Alonso	355	358	F sharp dim. 7 ->	
III	Ariel	359	370	A major	by augmentation of the counter melody
IV	Ferdinand & Miranda	371	396	A major	
V	Caliban and mischief	397	413	A minor, then C minor	
III	Ariel	413	414	G major	
II	Prospero	415	418	G major	
III	Ariel	419	434	G to D major (I->V)	
***	Coda	434	517	G major	Slower – now 6/4 (in two) -transformations of II and IV in combination – ceremonial music

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