

Joseph Joachim Raff

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

Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott

(A mighty fortress is our God)

Overture to a drama of the Thirty Years War

op.127 (1854/rev.1865)

Aside from the overtures composed to introduce his six operas, the orchestral suites, concerti, works for chorus and orchestra, and symphonies, Joachim Raff wrote few orchestral works in other forms. There are, for instance, no symphonic poems, a surprising fact given his close working relationship with Franz Liszt at the time when the older composer was in the midst of creating his cycle of such works. Raff composed a small handful of generic concert overtures and one work of incidental music written for performance as part of a stage play. This singular example in Raff's output formed the basis of the present work, the dramatic overture *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God), Opus 127.

In 1854, Raff, then 32 years old, had long been an important member of the New German School, Franz Liszt's closely knit community based in Weimar. He was, among other things, Liszt's personal secretary and factotum. He helped with the preparation of any number of Liszt's compositions including their orchestration, although Liszt often subsequently prepared definitive versions of many of these works. Although he wrote a prodigious amount of solo piano music up to and including this time, Raff also produced two operas during the Weimar period: *König Alfred* (WoO 14, 1848-50) and *Samson* (WoO 20, libretto 1851/2, music 1853-7). He also wrote about music and musical events of his time, including a most controversial book, *Die Wagnerfrage* (The Wagner Question), published shortly after the premiere of Wagner's *Lohengrin*. The rhetorical style of his analysis of the opera, sometimes positive, sometimes negative, caused a certain amount of dissention within Liszt's circle.

Around this same time (that is, in the summer of 1854), Raff wrote the incidental music to the play *Bernhard von Weimar* by Wilhelm Genast, who would become Raff's brother-in-law in 1859. In the catalogue of Raff's work, this collection of pieces is listed as WoO 17. The play was given a half dozen performances beginning in January 1855 before totally disappearing from the repertory. Happily, however, Raff wrote for these productions an Overture, two marches, a pair of fanfares for four trumpets, ruffles and flourishes for drums, and a variant of the close of the Overture to be played at the conclusion of the play. The two marches were published in 1885 by Aibl (Munich). The Overture underwent a number of modifications before being published in its final, revised form as Raff's Opus 127 by the Leipzig publisher Hofmeister in November 1866. In this final form, it was given its first performance on Palm Sunday, 26 March 1866, as a part of a benefit concert for the widows and orphans of the members of the orchestra of the Grossherzogliches Hoftheater, Wilhelm Kalliwoda conducting.

Although the text of Genast's play still exists today, it is not really possible to examine Raff's original music in its original context. There are, however, certain things which can be stated about the play. Its title refers to Baron Bernhard von Sachsen-Weimar (1604-1639), one of the most important military commanders in the 30 Years' War. Raff's inclusion of the well-known Lutheran hymn tune directly references the issue at the heart of the many conflicts that raged throughout Europe during this period: the conflict between established Catholicism and the ascendancy of Protestantism. Tradition has it that King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden had this chorale played as his soldiers went off to fight in the war. Baron Bernhard's military exploits were famous, and it has been suggested that he died after being poisoned by agents of the French minister, Armand Jean du Plessis de Richelieu (a/k/a Cardinal Richelieu!). Furthermore, Richelieu makes an appearance as a character in Genast's play, two of whose five acts are set in Paris in 1639, the year of Bernhard's death. Early performances of Raff's Overture in its various intermediate forms refer to the play variously as being a *Trauerspiel* (Tragedy) or a *Schauspiel* (Festival Play). Theodore Müller-Reuter, in

his *Lexicon der deutschen Konzertliteratur* (Bibliography of German Concert Literature) (1909), notes that the original version of the Overture, aside from having been transposed from the original key of C major up to D major, was also expanded in length by as much as one quarter. Volker Tosta, publisher of the renowned Raff Gesamtausgabe (Edition Nordstern), relates that "an earlier version of the Overture may have concluded with the chorale. The final version ends with music not heard previously in the overture and may have been used by Raff in the original incidental music." Its title changed with each of its initial performances: It was called, by turns: Overture to "Bernhard von Weimar", Tragedy by Genast; Dramatic Overture on the Chorale "*Ein feste Burg*"; Dramatic Overture to the Festival Play "Bernhard von Weimar"; Dramatic Overture on the Chorale "*Ein feste Burg*" to the Festival Play "Bernhard von Weimar"; and "*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*" - heroic-dramatic *Tonstück* in Overture form. At one point, it would seem as though Raff toyed with the idea that his "dramatic overture" was a kind of symphonic poem (*Tonstück*) - but his reluctance to acknowledge it decisively (along with his later Shakespeare Preludes) suggests that his attitudes towards this most characteristic of Romantic forms was ambivalent to say the least. With the exception of the present work, which at 18½ minutes is the longest of any of Raff's single-movement, non-concertante orchestral works, it seems fair to say that Raff thought his various overtures too restricted in scope to refer to them as symphonic poems. Of course, we would do well to consider the short orchestral works of Raff's contemporary, Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), whose four symphonic poems (*Le Rouet d'Omphale*, *Phaëton*, *Danse Macabre*, and *La Jeunesse d'Hercule*) are all comparable in length to Raff's Shakespeare Overtures.

Prior to composing the original version of the Overture in 1854, Raff had written no purely orchestral music. He was, however, not without experience in such composition if one considers that he had completed an opera and was well into his second, had written several works for chorus and orchestra, and devised the orchestration of a number works of his master, Franz Liszt. Raff had a natural affinity for writing for orchestra, and had plenty of opportunities to observe and learn firsthand during his Weimar years. He also produced a catalogue of over sixty works, nearly all of them keyboard and/or lieder compositions. Between 1854, when the incidental music for the stage play was written, and 1865, when the final concert version of the Overture as we know it today was completed, Raff's orchestral catalogue grew to include two symphonies, two concerti, three overtures and at least two additional works for chorus and orchestra. The expansion of the original version of the Overture, taken in the context of his "official" First Symphony ("*An das Vaterland*") is clearly representative of Raff at a stage when his rhetorical preferences ran to expansive and leisurely statements and developments. Indeed, the final version of the Overture (now in D major) could easily have been one of the movements of the *Vaterland* symphony - at least to the extent that both are built on pre-existing materials which Raff did not compose: Martin Luther's chorale (written sometime between 1521 and 1527), and Gustave Reichart's 1825 melody to accompany Ernst Moritz Arndt's poem "*Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland!*" Both pieces are unrepresentative of Raff's later, far more compressed and concise rhetorical method. It is interesting that Raff's Second Symphony, Opus 140, written shortly after the final version of the Overture, is already much more clearly focused and to the point.

The Overture is written for Raff's customary orchestral complement of Piccolo, 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 4 Horns, 2 Trumpets, 3 Trombones, Timpani and Strings. Its formal layout is rather clear and direct. The opening section, Andante religioso, in D major, is effectively a mid-19th century chorale prelude based on *Ein feste Burg*. The contrast between the relatively static rhythm of the chorale tune, played in long values against the contrapuntal accompaniment, sets the tune off to good advantage. Without having reached any particularly intense high point, the chorale breaks off, and the music transitions into the darker realm of D minor, where the main body of the piece lives. Marked Allegro eroico, the bulk of the Overture is essentially a straightforward sonata form structure concerned with two themes. The one is comprised primarily of dotted rhythms and is redolent of the atmosphere of Liszt's *Hunnenschlacht* and *Mazepa* (albeit if, it should be noted, at something more than arm's length). The second theme, in F major, is at once more recognizably Raffian in its shape, color, and antiphonal orchestral layout. It grows to a very intense climax, where the chorale tune makes a brief appearance. A full-scale, extensive development of the two themes ensues, and, at its climax, the chorale tune makes a third appearance as an addition to the developmental mix. The recapitulation begins immediately but focuses solely on the second theme,

now transposed to D major. A return to the minor mode signals a second, considerably abridged development, whose purpose past its climax is to prepare for the conclusion of the work. The tempo slackens to Andante, and the chorale is heard for the final time, first in the minor and then, after a tremendous crescendo, in the major. There, the piece might have ended, but for the fact that, having progressed through accelerando, we are back to allegro (Allegro trionfale), at which point a new swatch of martial-flavored material makes its unexpected appearance (perhaps a holdover from some of the incidental music). The tone becomes rather Beethovenian, but as only Raff could have reconceived him and his Ninth Symphony - on a note of triumph. Otherwise and throughout, the chorale, as an unambiguous reflection of its title, serves as a point of reference, something above the fray, immutable and truthful, content to be a refuge from the storm of human conflict raging beneath it.

Avrohom Leichtling, © 2009

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