

Joseph Joachim Raff

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

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, op. 209 *Im Sommer* (1878)

The Eleventh of Joachim Raff's twelve symphonies, *Im Sommer*, was composed in the Summer and Fall of 1878 in Frankfurt am Main. The work was published as Symphony No. 9 (E minor), Opus 208 by C. F. W. Siegel in November, 1879, and was issued in score, parts and four hand piano arrangement. The first performance occurred on 28 March 1879 in Wiesbaden's Kurhaus by the Städtisches Orchester Wiesbaden, conducted by Louis Lüstner. It is the third of Raff's four Seasons symphonies and is perhaps the most elaborate and, in certain respects, the most complex of the four.

Outwardly, Raff presents an apparently conventional formal design: a symphony in four movements. Internally, things are altogether a different story. From the industrious fugal buzzing of insects during the hot day of the first movement to the refreshing harvest celebration of the finale, this ›Summer‹ is a musical travelogue of the season itself.

The Ninth Symphony has a number of other interesting associations and connections beyond itself. *Im Sommer* initiated Raff's orchestral exploration into the world of Shakespeare. This would be followed by the *Four Shakespeare Preludes* written, in 1879. In the present case, however, the association of generic summertime images includes direct references to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

As with all of his symphonies, Raff eschews the monumental apparatus of the late 19th century. The modest ensemble consists of 3 Flutes, 2 oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 4 Horns, 2 Trumpets, 3 Trombones, Timpani, Triangle and Strings. Raff coaxes, contrives, cajoles, and squeezes an incredible variety of colors and textures from his band, and seduces the ear with one unexpected event after another. Indeed, Raff, along with Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner made the kaleidoscopic handling of orchestral color a primary compositional element.

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Im Sommer opens with a striking example of Raff's use of layered textures in which two or more totally different musical types are overlaid, a device Raff generally reserves for the culminating moments of his symphonies. Raff, who was a master contrapuntalist, was well ahead of the curve insofar as his interest and study of the music of the Renaissance. The symphony begins in a manner resembling Palestrina with a floating, almost arhythmical three part motet played by divided violins. Raff immediately overlays this with a bucolic clarinet tune, accompanied by a second clarinet playing a rustic alberti bass and supported by low pizzicato strings. Conceptually, both elements share a common tonality (E minor), harmonic rhythm and movement. Paradoxically, opposed as they are in content, their very structure permits them to work together in complete agreement. In the midst of all this is the factit

that we are being given two of the main thematic ideas of the movement. In many of the symphonies we find fragmentary openings that coalesce into full statements. Here, having been given not one, but two themes, the opening build up leads not to a full statement but rather to cadential figuration and transition. What is more typical is Raff's avoidance of expected harmonic relationships in the presentation of his thematic material. As if perhaps to suggest the buzzing of summer insects, the very brief opening statement gives way to sotto voce strings in full fugal exposition, in F minor! Almost at once the fugal exposition modulates to its dominant, C major, and then suddenly shifts gears by presenting the fourth and fifth ideas which parallel in content and presentation the opening. Here, pitted against a ›background‹ of hocketing strings a new theme emerges in which the Palestrinan ethereality of the opening is converted into a fully harmonized and thoroughly romantic (if diatonic) tune which reaches for a full orchestral statement. This never arrives but rather fades away into a quietly insistent sixteenth note ostinato in the violins giving a suggestion of »something indefinite but pregnant with possibilities hovering in the air.« Overlaid on this sixth idea the seventh thematic episode of the exposition of this sonata form movement emerges as a rhythmically incisive and agitated theme in C minor. This time, it is allowed a more complete moment of full statement before fading away, resolved to C major. Raff's preference for collections of themes and contrasting ideas is fundamentally theatrical and anticipatory of the expository nature of much present day cinema in which a multiplicity of characters, situations and ideas are presented sometimes giving the appearance of haphazardness but nevertheless carefully calculated and built on solid, irreproachable logic. The development follows these seven ›characters‹ through a variety of transformations, elaborations and events which culminate in a recapitulation whose order of presentation is effectively reversed. The big C major tune returns in E major, the C minor episode returns in E minor, but the opening E minor is brought back initially in C major (played by trombones, not violins, accompanied by pizzicato arpeggios without bucolic clarinets) before ultimately landing squarely in the tonic E minor for a cadential telescoping of the clarinet's original melody.

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The second movement, *The Elves' Hunt*, presents a highly distilled view of the spirit of certain elements of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is also the longest and most complex scherzo in Raff's symphonic output. Originally entitled *Oberon and Titania's Love Song*, Raff places a number of verbal signs posts in the score. At several points he identifies a solo viola as "Titania" and a solo cello as "Oberon". At other places, he identifies "The Elves", "Oberon and Titania", and "The Hunt". Interestingly, like Shakespeare's Puck who leads the two pairs of human lovers astray, is that this is not a Shakespearean tone poem at all. It is, rather, a suggestion, a Debussian impression in Raffian terms. As such it is the very antithesis of the narrative program music concept as it developed in and after Raff's time. Throughout virtually the entire movement Raff maintains a nine part division of strings laying the emphasis on simultaneous or rapidly alternating intricate textures. The movement is laid out in four self contained sections. The first of these, in F major (a key completely unrelated to E minor and, purely by its jarring non-relationship to E, totally bracing and refreshing to the ear), plays off horn calls answered by various wind instruments with music of elfin lightness and fluttering whose character, while paying its respects to its Mendelssohnian and Berliozian forebears, goes far beyond them in every respect. It is interesting to see how the

mercurial elves in this scherzo become the ghostly spirits of the subsequent F minor symphony. Both movements share certain common types of material and orchestral thinking. Marked >the elves< in the score, this section leads directly to the episode marked "Oberon and Titania" - for multi-part divided strings, solo viola and cello, now in D major, and utilizing Raff's trademark rhythmic augmentation which allows the music, in effect, to slow down by half without actually changing tempo. Here is subdued romantic ardor made even more curious by the absence of any orchestral color save for the strings. At its opening, the cello intones the name "Ti-tan-i-a" while the viola answers "O-be-ron". Reminders of the opening horn calls see the tonality shift to D minor for "the Elves' hunt" - whose totality contains an embedded sonata form structure. Its culminating point brings in four Horns in unison, the only brass in the movement, whose broad melody and harmonization are reminiscent of the parallel passage in the scherzo of the 8th Symphony. The music shifts between B flat major, E flat minor and D major. Absent the full orchestral apparatus, it can't build up the kind of climax that appears to be coming, but simply "dissolves" back into the music that preceded it. Having re-established F major, the movement ends with an astonishing transformation of thematic references by joining the music of the elves to that of Oberon and Titania in yet another example of musical simultaneity.

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The C major third movement, *Eclogue*, affects a change from Shakespearean magic to the world of antiquity. Raff's use of the term is relatively rare. Although it turns up in his *Cinq Eglogues pour Piano* Opus 105, it is unique in his symphonic output and should be seen in the context of the writings of Virgil and Theocritus whose pastoral odes gave birth to it. What is far more surprising is its opening which could easily be mistaken, idiomatically, for passages in Sibelius' 5th Symphony! Another orthographical curiosity is that Raff refers to this movement along with the fourth as one long section. The *Eclogue* is marked >IIIa<, and the finale >IIIb<, even though the two movements are separate and different. In *Im Walde*, Raff joined the second and third movements together by placing thematic cross references between them to enforce the perception of connection. Here, that kind of connectivity is absent. The *Eclogue* is one of the shortest slow movements in the entire Raffian canon whose simplicity and lyrical directness give it the aspect of an intermezzo. The fundamental poetic concept of the eclogue as a dialogue between two voices is established at once with its Sibelian oboe solo accompanied by droning horns and bassoons answered by contrasting lyrical strings. The two elements are developed in a back and forth manner through a series of episodes that gives the whole the structure of a quiet, untroubled rondo. All is friendly and almost dreamlike in its avoidance of sustained climactic moments similar to the preceding movements. The concluding plagal cadence serves to emphasize by stylistic displacement its "antique" nature.

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The fourth movement (IIIb), *To the Harvest Wreath*, returns suddenly to E major. This time Raff presents his materials successively with the overlaying of thematic threads occurring later in the movement, both in the development as well as in the concluding passages of a loosely constructed sonata form movement. A Harvest Wreath is made from a number of

different grains and or flowers reaped at the end of the summer growing season. While technically a symbol of the Fall celebration, it is appropriate that Raff concluded his Summer symphony with such a celebration. The title can be understood in an active sense - the transformation from devotional thanksgiving to joyous celebration. Like the Harvest Wreath itself, Raff's wreath is a bounteous collection of many themes, each with its own distinct character. Beginning in confident solemnity, the music passes through several ideas before an insistent syncopated figure comes to dominate and transform matters an energetically whirling succession of new ideas. Some of these, like the syncopated figure that generates the shift, are more declamatory - one of them is remarkably close to of one of the principal themes of the final movement of *Aus Thüringen*, Raff's decidedly extrovert travelogue orchestral suite of 1875. The contrast between optimistic solemnity and flat out festive frivolity form the pair of opposites that Raff ultimately combines in a manner similar to the first and second movements. As with the finales of the other Seasons symphonies, Raff constructs this finale as a sequence of self contained episodes in which the sonata form principal is handled more along the lines of cinematic montage rather than as predictable thematic and harmonic transformations. Also notable is the fact that Raff restores the full orchestra for his finale with the reinstatement of the trumpets, trombones and timpani. Curiously, he spends a great deal of time, even to the extent of changing key signatures, in C major. Indeed, the harmonic relationship of the tonic to its altered sub-mediante (either in fact, as in E major to C major, or F major to D major, for example) is one of the principal underpinnings of the work. By the time we reach the concluding pages of the score, it is abundantly clear that the rustic impressionism of the opening has been thoroughly transformed and brought into sharp focus. Indeed, the 9th Symphony proved to be one of Raff's most successful pieces, earning unusually high praise across the entire professional and critical spectrum when it was first performed.

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