

The Academy

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RAFF'S SYMPHONIES

1. "*An das Vaterland*" eine Preis-Symphonie in fünf Abtheilungen, für das grosse Orchester. Von Joachim Raff. Op. 96. (Leipzig: J. Scliuberth & Co.)
2. *Symphonie (No. 2, C dur)* für grosses Orchester. Von Joachim Raff. Op. 140. (Mainz: Schott.)
3. "*Im Walde*" Sinfonie (No 3, F dur) für grosses Orchester. Von Joachim Raff. Op.153. (Leipzig: F. Kistner.)
4. *Symphonie (No.4, G moll)* für grosses Orchester. Von Joachim Raff. Op.167. (Leipzig: J. Schuberth & Co.)
5. "*Lenore*" *Symphonie (No.5, E dur)* für grosses Orchester. Von Joachim Raff. Op.177. (Leipzig and Weimar: Robert Seitz.)
6. *Sinfonie (No.6, D moll)* für grosses Orchester. Von Joachim Raff. Op.189. (Berlin and Posen: Bote & Bock.)

It has long been allowed that of all the tests to which an instrumental composer can submit himself, the writing of a symphony is one of the most severe. The best proof of this is to be found in the small proportion of the large number of works of this class produced which make any real and lasting impression. The majority of new symphonies are heard once — perhaps even two or three times — and then pass away into oblivion, and are thought of no more. Again, how seldom, comparatively, is the success of a musician's "first symphony" sufficient to encourage him to write a second! The fact is that a rare combination of the highest gifts is needed to form a really great symphonic writer. Beside the individuality of idea and conception necessary to give a distinct "style" to his work, he must possess the most complete mastery over the resources of counterpoint, and the even more precious faculty of "thematic development." Of the management of an orchestra less need be said, because this is comparatively the easiest part of the composer's work; and many symphonies are to be met with the scores of which are beautifully laid out, though they may be wanting in nearly every other requisite of a truly great work.

No living composer possesses the various qualifications referred to above as needful to the symphonist in so large a measure as Joachim Raff. I have no hesitation in saying that the works now under notice are, taken as a whole, the greatest symphonies written since those of Schumann. While inferior to this composer in poetic beauty of imagination, Raff is far his superior all that pertains to the technique of his art. Before speaking in detail of the six symphonies with which he has enriched the répertoire of the concert-room, a few remarks on his peculiar characteristics will probably interest our readers.

Raff just (and only just) falls short in the possession of the highest genius. If one compares one of the best of his symphonies with one of Beethoven's, this will be clearly seen. In a symphony of Beethoven it is the *musical idea* which chiefly holds attention and compels admiration, his treatment of the subjects is either a secondary matter, or is so indissolubly concerned with the ideas themselves, that one cannot be detached from the other. In Raff on the contrary, it is the masterly skill of the workmanship which produces the most forcible impression; the themes which are treated are often of subsidiary importance. The composer seems deficient in self criticism; he sometimes appears to take the first series of notes which occurs to him and goes on to construct a most elaborate and extensive movement out of them, as if intent upon disproving the old saying that one "cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Raff's melody is for the most part simple and very appreciable, and sometimes "ear catching" to a degree that verges on the commonplace. He prefers diatonic to chromatic subjects, and frequently constructs themes entirely on the notes of the scale, sometimes (as in the finale to the "Wald-Symphony," or the opening of his sonata for piano and violin) merely on the notes of a common chord. His subjects always lend themselves well to thematic development and in this branch of his art Raff may be compared even with Beethoven himself. Such specimens of workmanship as the finale of the Symphony in C, No.2, the whole of the G minor Symphony and the first and last movements of that in D minor are truly models of form. This is the more surprising when it is remembered that he is a self-taught man. His contrapuntal skill is at times really admirable. He has a peculiarity which I have not met with, at least to nothing like the same extent in the works of any other symphonic writer. He frequently takes two quite distinct subjects from different parts of the same symphony, and works them together in a most ingenious way. To give one illustration of this: in his last symphony (in D minor) the slow movement is an amply developed funeral march. This is written in the normal march-form, and is followed, according to rule, by a trio. So far there is nothing unusual; but in the *coda*, which concludes the march, these two themes (that of the march and the trio), which are totally unlike another, are introduced simultaneously, with the happiest effect. As to the other devices of fugue, canon, and imitation, his scores are full of them. Scientific writing has been called "the salt of composition;" if it be, Raff's music is certainly highly flavoured. It should in justice be added that his fugal writing is seldom, if ever, dull.

There is, however, one serious drawback to the popularity of these symphonies which must be mentioned — they are nearly all more or less too spun out. Prolivity is Raff's easily besetting sin. Evidently gifted with the greatest fluency in composition, and able at a moment's notice to throw off any quantity of thematic development by the yard, he does not always know when he has said enough. Every one of his symphonies is very long. That in G minor is the shortest, but this is only short by comparison. All the works would have gained materially by compression. This tendency towards undue length is not peculiar to Raff; it is characteristic of by far the greater part of recent German music. The modern development of instrumental composition points less to the creation of new forms than to the enlargement of those which already exist. It may be urged that Raff and his contemporaries are only doing with respect to Beethoven what the latter did with regard to Mozart and Haydn; but there is this important difference, that Beethoven justified his extension of form by the wealth of ideas and the importance of the subject-matter, whereas modern composers too often use excessive elaboration to conceal poverty of invention. This cannot be said of Raff; still he is none the less open to the charge of too great lengthiness.

One more point remains to be noticed before saying a few words about the symphonies separately. Raff has a decided partiality for what is known as "programme music." Of the six works now under notice, four have a definite argument attached to them. Mendelssohn remarked on the subject of programme music, that after Beethoven had taken the step he did in the Pastoral Symphony, it was impossible to keep clear of it. Few musicians would condemn it *per se*; the great point that should be borne in mind is that it should be, as Beethoven himself said of his Pastoral Symphony, "mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als malerei" — expression of emotion, rather than painting. In Raff's symphonies we find both; and while those movements in which "expression of emotion" is attempted are frequently among their composer's most successful efforts, he fails when he essays the painting "of the wild hunt of Hulda and Wotan" in the *finale* of the "Im Walde," or the ghostly ride in the "Lenore."

The first symphony, "An das Vaterland," was written, as we learn from a note by the composer prefixed to the score, between the years 1859 and 1861. In the latter year the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde at Vienna offered prizes for the best symphony, and Raff sent in his work, which obtained the first prize. It is, nevertheless, on the whole by no means a satisfactory composition. First and foremost, it suffers more than any that follow it from terrible prolixity. It enjoys, indeed, the somewhat doubtful distinction of being, in all probability, the longest symphony in existence, occupying an hour and a quarter in performance. The programme, which is too long to quote in full, is a most curious one. The first movement is intended to portray the German character, its reflective

tendency, its mingled courage and gentleness, and its thoughtfulness. In the second movement (*scherzo*) we have the German forest, with the bray of the huntsmen's horns, and the fields with the sounds of the "Volkslied." The following *larghetto* is supposed to represent the German homestead, cheered by Love and the Muses. The fourth movement (*allegro drammatico*) is meant to illustrate the vain endeavours towards the unity of the Fatherland; while the *finale* depicts the lamentation over the distracted condition of Germany, and the hope and foreshadowing of a glorious future for her when united. A stranger and more impracticable subject for musical illustration it would probably be hard to find; nor could Raff draw much inspiration from it. Apart altogether from its preposterous length — each movement seems as if it would never come to a close — it is laboured and wanting in spontaneity to a painful extent. It conveys the idea that the composer was determined to outdo all the symphony writers who had preceded him. He certainly has done so; but the result is a monstrosity, a sort of musical "sea-serpent." The symphony contains an immense amount of clever writing, and even many charming details, but as a whole it is decidedly a failure. Had Raff written no better symphonies than this, I should certainly not have troubled the readers of the ACADEMY with any account of them. I have included this one for the sake of making my notice of the series complete.

Of a very different stamp is the symphony in C, No.2. It is difficult to realise the fact that this work and the "An das Vaterland" are the productions of the same pen. Here we find all the best characteristics of Raff's music. The ideas, at times slightly commonplace, are always pleasing; and their treatment is masterly throughout. The opening subject of the first movement bears a curious (though doubtless accidental) resemblance to the second theme in the allegro of the overture to *Fra Diavolo*: it is somewhat wanting in dignity, but full of life and spirit, and the animation of the opening is sustained through the whole of a rather long movement. Here no programme is attempted; the hearer's attention is not distracted by trying to find out what the composer meant. It is a significant fact that while Raff so frequently writes with a definite programme, it is precisely the two symphonies in which this is wanting (the second and fourth) which must rank highest as works of art. The *andante con moto* of the present symphony is charming throughout. The treatment of the orchestra is admirable — in this respect, it may be said in passing, Raff's symphonies are models — and the melodies have a refinement which is not invariably to be found in the composer's works. A particularly fine point occurs towards the close of the movement (pp.107-109 of the score), where the principal subject is used as a bass, and given out *ff* by the basses and trombones, against the counterpoint of the upper parts. The *scherzo* which follows is somewhat Beethovenish in tone, though without plagiarism; the trio, with its three-bar rhythms is particularly good, as well as thoroughly fresh. The *finale*, which is preceded by a rather long introduction, is from its elaborate counterpoint perhaps the finest movement of the work. The chief themes, though certainly pleasing, are, again, not remarkably fresh; but the skill with which they are handled keeps up the attention to the last. On the whole, as already said, this second symphony must be considered one of the very best of the series.

"Im Walde" — the "Forest" symphony — is the work of Raff's which is best known, and most frequently performed, on the Continent. Nor is its popularity surprising. Though I am inclined on the whole to rank it slightly below No. 2 from a purely musical point of view, it is certainly more adapted to catch the popular ear. It is pre-eminently a "tuneful" symphony, full of melodies that one whistles or hums almost involuntarily; perhaps without recollecting whence they come. The three leading themes of the first *allegro* especially partake of this character. "Im Walde" is another programme-symphony, divided into three sections, as follows:— First section (opening movement) — In the day-time, impressions and feelings. Second section; In the twilight. 1. Reverie (*largo*); 2. Dance of Dryads (*scherzo*). Third section (*finale*) — By night. Quiet movement of night in the forest. Entry and exit of the wild hunt with Hulda and Wotan. Break of day. Of these the first and second sections are legitimate subjects for musical treatment, and the composer is successful accordingly. The first movement, though somewhat diffuse (the score occupies ninety-nine pages), is full of charm, the *largo* is of a dreamy character which well befits its subject, and the "Dance of Dryads" is light and piquant, and admirable in musical treatment. In the course of this movement the subject of the *largo* is incidentally introduced with great skill and excellent effect. Of the *finale*

it is impossible to speak so highly. The “wild hunt” is very noisy, very chromatic, and terribly spun out — the *finale* extends over 138 pages. The movement is full of life and vigour; but Raff has attempted here to paint what I cannot help thinking out of the province of music, and has failed in consequence. But for the *finale* I should have ranked this symphony the highest of the six; but this movement is the weak point of the work. It is, nevertheless, written with all its composer's great technical skill, and brilliantly, though somewhat noisily instrumented.

In the fourth symphony, in G minor, is again to be found another gem. Here for the second time we find “absolute” as distinguished from “programme” music. If we liken the second symphony to a painting of great breadth of design and large outline, No. 4 may be compared to an exquisite miniature. Though, like its companions, described on the title as “für grosses Orchester,” it differs from the rest of the symphonies in the absence of trombones throughout the score. The first movement is of a tender, almost plaintive character; the second subject and its continuation are especially beautiful. The thematic developments of the second part of this movement are in their composer's best style. The following *scherzo* is bustling and animated, but constructed on a very uninteresting subject — apparently the first which came into Raff's head; the theme of the trio is beautiful, but unfortunately not original, being almost identical with the subject of Schubert's Rondo in A, Op.107, for piano duet. The slow movement (*andante, non troppo mosso*) is a charming set of variations on a simple and beautiful theme; and the *finale*, though rather commonplace in its subjects, has so much animation, and is so interesting in treatment, that its success, well played, would be certain. The entire work is indeed well worthy of performance.

Of the fifth symphony (“Lenore”) I spoke in detail on the occasion of its recent production at the Crystal Palace (see ACADEMY November 21, 1874). As I have nothing to add to what I then said, I will simply refer my readers to that notice, and pass on to the last of the series.

The sixth symphony, in D minor, bears the motto, “Gelebt, gestrebt, gelitten, gestritten, gestorben, umworben,” which may be roughly paraphrased in English as “Life and aspiration, suffering and strife, death and renown.” It thus typifies the career of many an artist. In his treatment of this subject it is not always easy to follow the thread of the composer's ideas. Undoubtedly, the third movement, a funeral march, represents the “gestorben,” and the brilliant and joyous *finale* is just as certainly intended to depict the “umworben.” Probably also life and its aspirations are meant to be indicated by the first movement; but what in the world the light and playful *scherzo* which follows has to do with “gelitten, gestritten” I cannot conceive. Leaving this point, however, to be determined by those who are wiser than myself, a few words may be said as to the general character of the symphony. The best portion beyond dispute is the funeral march — a movement which one is almost tempted to compare for breadth and dignity with that in the “Eroica;” the rest of the work is, as regards ideas, of inferior interest. This symphony, more than most of the others, seems to have come from the head rather than the heart, and to be the product of reflection and deliberation rather than of inspiration. The workmanship of the whole, its counterpoints and developments, are wonderfully clever, often really fine; but the work after repeated readings leaves one cold — always excepting the third movement. The subject of the *scherzo*, for instance, is uninteresting, not to say positively dry; and all the artifices of counterpoint cannot compensate for lack of invention. The same may also be said, though to a less extent; of the *finale*, in which Raff lavishes all the resources of his ingenuity on a rather commonplace subject. The movement is certainly effective; but how much more effective would it not have been had the composer exercised more care in the selection of his materials.

It is of course possible that impressions derived merely from reading the scores may be modified to some extent when submitted to the test of actual hearing. In the case of the third symphony, I shall be in a position next week to say how far this is the case, as the work is announced for a first performance in London at the Philharmonic Concert on Monday evening.

EBENEZER PROUT