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REVIEWS

Welt-Ende. Gericht. Neue Welt. Oratorium nach Worten der heiligen Schrift Zumal der Offenbarung Johannis, von Joachim Raff (Op. 212).

[Leipzig : Breitkopf und Härtel.]

If this be Raff's "Swan's Song," as there is reason to believe, then nothing in his artistic career became him like his final effort. The Oratorio is an earnest and, in many respects, a noble work, worthy of the great Yorkshire (Leeds) Festival at which it will be produced. We hope to show this in the course of a review that must necessarily be lengthy. If it prove tedious also, let the fault lie at our door.

The book of the Oratorio deals with its tremendous subject in simple yet effective fashion. It brings the seer of Patmos before us and makes him tell again the story of his visions. There is no other personage. *St. John* speaks, and the art of the composer strives to illustrate or depict the scenes, as they follow each other in magnificent procession. The book is divided into three parts, entitled as above; the first, "Welt Ende," being sub-divided into four sections—viz. : the "Vision of John," the "Apocalyptic Riders," the "Question and Thanks of the Martyrs," the "Last Signs in Nature and Despair of Men." In the first section we have the vision of the book sealed with seven seals, and of the Lamb who alone was worthy to open it. The second section, we need hardly say, deals with the three horsemen, of whom the last was Death. Next comes the vision of the Martyrs, with their cry, "How long, O Lord," and their thanks for gracious consolation; while the fourth section shows the convulsions of nature and the anguish of those who entreat the mountains to fall upon them. In the second part, "Judgment," we see the great angel and hear the trumpets of doom. The quick and dead stand before God, and the lost and saved express their despair and joy. The third part, "Neue Welt," reveals a new heaven and new earth, and sings the praises of their Creator; the whole ending with the Benediction, "The grace of our Lord be with us all, Amen." We may add that the words are taken from the Apocalypse, with here and there a passage from other parts of Holy Writ.

As regards the musical treatment of the subject, some general remarks are called for. In the first place great prominence is given to the orchestra as an independent means of expression. Besides the Introduction (which is brief), there are no fewer than eight movements for instruments alone, some of them extended ones, and all of them meant to serve as musical pictures of definite scenes. Such a lavish employment of the orchestra is new to oratorio, but we need not point out that the idea here expanded is at least as old as Bach and Handel, each of whom introduced a "Pastoral" movement into his greatest sacred work. Next, we find a pronounced and positive use of the *leit-motive*, or representative theme. Raff, however, confines himself to three or four such subjects, and uses them in a fashion so simple and direct that they help to make the music significant rather than confuse it. In the third place, the composer, while working out his instrumental movements with conspicuous freedom, adheres to orthodox form where the voices are concerned. Most of the choruses, indeed, are contrapuntal, in the old-fashioned manner; and the entire work may be regarded as a curious and interesting attempt to combine methods which have come down to us with others developed in our own day. Such, briefly stated, are the more salient features of the Oratorio. Let us now go on to details, premising that the pianoforte score before us contains no guide to the orchestration.

The work opens with an orchestral introduction (*Adagio*), 67 bars long, in the key of E major, common time. It has two themes, both important; the first being a *leit-motive*, the second simply reappearing in the final Benediction chorus. The *leit-motive* is used throughout in connection with the Divine Being, and, that the repetition of sacred names may be here avoided, we will call it the Throne theme. It is announced in octaves at the opening, and compels attention by its solemn, dignified character:—



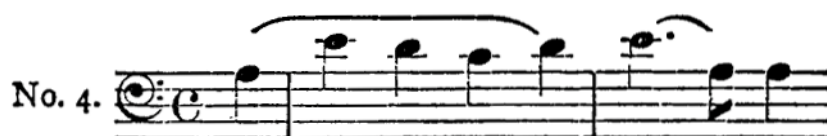
The second, or Benediction, subject quickly appears—



but this is treated fugally. Then we have the Throne motive a second time, harmonised in C sharp minor, followed by a brief *stretto* of the second subject, and an equally short coda. Passing on without break, the Throne theme reappears in its original key, attended by sustained chords from the acuter instruments. This introduces *St. John* (bass), who takes up his parable with the words : “And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the Throne a book sealed with seven seals,” the narrative continuing as far as “And I wept much because no man was found worthy,” &c. The passage is set in—if the term may pass—semi-recitative; that is, the phrases have a recitative form, but are sung in measured time, with orchestral accompaniment, and interludes, occasionally of a descriptive character. An air, “Lord, hear my voice when I cry” (*Larghetto*, A flat), follows, and, as far as its purely classic form goes, might have been written by Mendelssohn, whose method it suggests in other respects. We subjoin the opening bars of the voice part only, since they suffice to show the character of the air:—



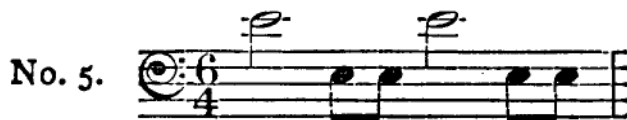
The Apostle, having ended his prayer, resumes the narrative; telling of the Lamb who came and took the book out of the hand of Him that sat upon the throne. Reference to the Lamb is twice interrupted by a short phrase—



destined soon to reappear, while the mention of the Throne brings in once more its representative theme. *St. John* proceeds to speak of the angels' song, “Worthy is the Lamb,” which directly follows, set in chorus for three sopranos and contralto, and leading off with the

phrase just quoted. The theme is introduced fugally, but this contrapuntal form is not long maintained, the brief number continuing and ending with simply harmonised *ensemble* passages of beautiful effect.

We now pass to the section entitled "The Apocalyptic Riders." The Seer announces his narrative with the issuing forth of the white horse, bearing one armed with a bow. This apparition is attended by an orchestral figure—



carried on without pause into an Intermezzo entitled "The Pestilence," throughout which it is continuously heard. Raff's authority for connecting "Pestilence" with the horseman who went forth conquering and to conquer is not quite clear, but we need not discuss the point. As for the Intermezzo, an Allegro in D minor, it may be described as a series of wailing chromatic progressions, the extreme parts, as a rule, moving by semi-tones. No quotation need be made, save of the Coda, which is a passage representative of Death. We shall meet with it again and again:—



Certain features in the accompaniment to the next Recitative have a character which leads us to expect them again, and they duly appear in a second Intermezzo entitled "War " [*Andante*, A minor). The subjoined extract shows the constant rhythmical figure of this movement, and also the leading theme:—



There is a second subject, having the following as its principal melodic forms :—

No. 8.

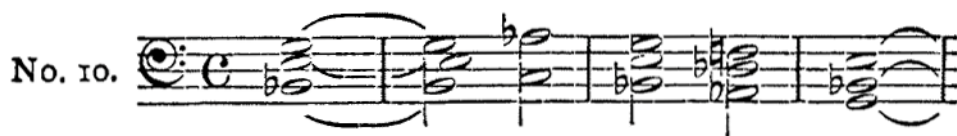
8va.....

No. 8a.

With the materials above indicated and some episodic matter, including conventional trumpet-passages, the composer builds up his descriptive piece, finishing, as in "Pestilence," with the Death motive (Ex. 6). That "War" is appropriately vigorous and stirring cannot be denied. In performance it may reveal other and higher qualities. At the close *St. John* resumes his narrative, and we see the rider of the black horse issue forth, bearing the balances. Then follows a third Intermezzo (*Quasi-Andante piu mosso*, B minor) entitled "Famine." This movement, though marked by varied effect, the product of varied treatment, has really but a single theme, and here it is:—

No. 9.

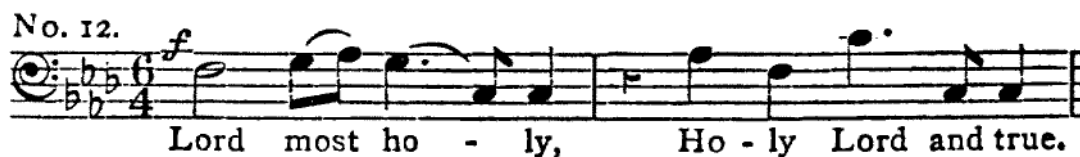
The impression of a subject so wailing in character, and attended, presently, by a crowd of chromatic harmonies, is easy to imagine. As in the two previous cases, the solemn music of the Death theme forms a Coda. Again the Apostle resumes, telling now of the pale horse, ridden by Death and followed by Hell. This is, as it should be, the most impressive of all the recitatives. The motive just referred to is conspicuous in accompaniment, as is another passage preceding the reference to Hell, which it may be taken to represent:—



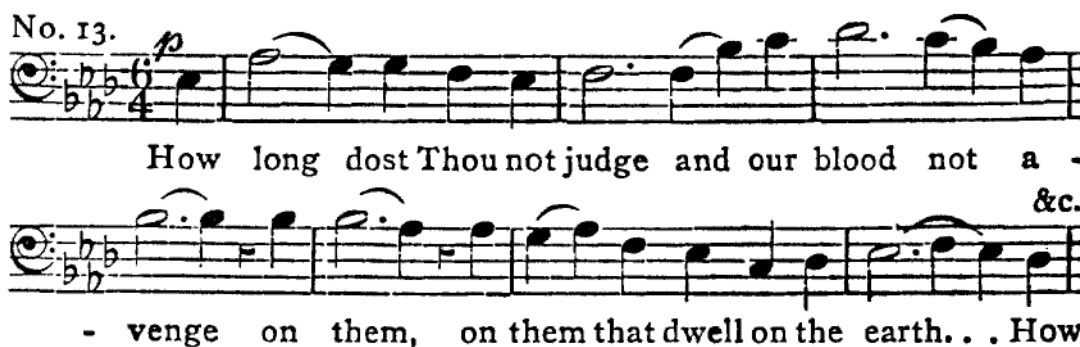
A fourth Intermezzo follows (*Allegro*, E minor) and is called "Death and Hell." It faithfully exemplifies the character of the entire work, as far as the Oratorio is a compound of strict scholasticism and free expression in the most modern manner. First we have the Death theme, treated contrapuntally, with "augmentation" and "diminution" *secundum artem*. The composer, however, soon finds this irksome, and throwing off his self-imposed bonds, indulges in the "wild shriek of liberty" to which he has elsewhere accustomed us. There is yet a method in what he does, for the Hell theme, now made more chromatic—



dominates the orchestra, and gives a kind of sinister consistency to its shrieks and groans. From such wild turmoil to the recitative telling of the fifth Seal and the "noble army of martyrs" is a change indeed—no less welcome than pronounced. So far, one brief number excepted, all the music has been for bass voice and orchestra. We hail, therefore, the introduction at this point of a Chorus of Martyrs (*Andante*, F minor) "Lord most holy." Like most of its fellows, it is contrapuntal and opens, fugally, with the subjoined bold theme:—



After brief treatment of the foregoing, a longer and more melodious theme is announced by the basses—



and also developed in fugue form, the original subject presently returning by way of Coda. The recitative then resumes with the text "And white robes were given unto them," after which follows a second Chorus of Martyrs (*Allegro*, F major), "We thank Thee, Lord, Almighty God." The leading motive here begins in vocal unison, after an orchestral introduction—



but is soon treated contrapuntally. It constitutes by no means the most striking part of the Chorus, since there are at least two episodes of remarkable power and impressiveness, to which,

if space allowed, we should call particular attention. These passed, the theme above quoted reappears in *stretto*, and a brief though fine Coda ends the section. Coming to the final subdivision of Part I., we experience the relief of hearing a solo voice which is not bass. A contralto declaims the passage "Thrust in thy sickle and reap, for the time is come for thee to reap, and the harvest of the earth is ripe." Moreover, it follows up the recitative with an air (*Adagio*, D major), "Great and wonderful are Thy works," that claims to rank among the most beautiful and exalted things in sacred music. Its simplicity, dignity, and reverence are conspicuous throughout, but an idea of all these qualities may be gathered from the opening phrase:—

No. 15. $p < f >$ mf

Great . . and won - der - ful

are Thy works.

$p < f > p$

St. John now proceeds to tell of the great earthquake and the terrible natural phenonema that usher in the "last things." At this point, the orchestra once more comes to the front with a "tone-picture" (*Andante con moto*, A minor), representing the "Final Tokens." The kernel of this movement is found in the opening bars:—

No. 16. *Andante con moto.*

[Musical example continued...]



and with like use of dissonances and chromatic progressions, varied by rushing quaver triplets and arpeggios, it continues to the end. We do not know that anything more need be said about it. There is no pause or break before the solo voice enters, telling of the despair of men, which presently finds formal expression in a chorus (*Allegro*, E minor), "Fall on us." Like its predecessors the number is largely contrapuntal. It starts with the following subject, an orchestral counterpoint of quavers being in attendance:—



Fall on us now, fall on us . . . and hide us.

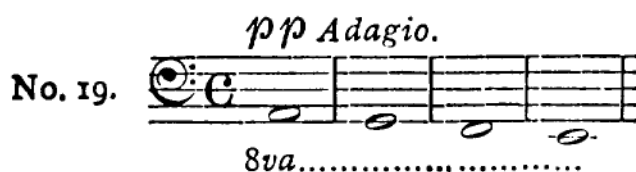
This is developed with animation and a scholastic effect curiously at variance with modern ideas as to the musical equivalent of despair. Presently, a vocal counterpoint presents itself—

No. 18. SOPRANO.

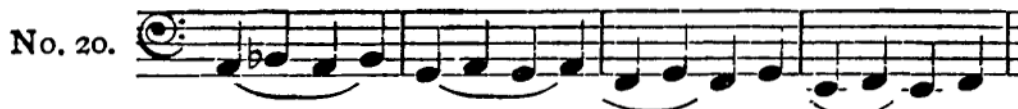
Hide us from His wrath, His who on the throne doth set.



to be soon treated in imitation as an independent theme. The chorus, however, is not entirely of this character, its later pages being devoted to harmonic effects and orchestral colouring of a very striking sort. As a whole the number deserves to rank among the finest in the work. It makes apparent the hand of a master. The Apostle again taking up his story, tells how the seventh Seal was broken and silence reigned in Heaven; how, also, seven angels blew upon seven trumpets. This suggests to the composer a short Intermezzo for those instruments, but as the movement is of a purely conventional character, it need not detain us. We then hear of the Earth and the Sea, Death and Hell giving up their dead, the voice, in the last two cases, being attended by the representative themes, which, however, play a more conspicuous part in another Intermezzo, "The Resurrection" (*Adagio*, A minor) immediately following. The construction of this movement is curious. In the first place a motive, representing—as we gather from its use in the preceding recitative—the depths of earth and sea, is heard in the lowest part of the bass scale—



and continues as a ground bass for thirty-six bars—for twenty bars as above quoted, then with a sullen and slow vibration—



which quickens into quavers, triplets of quavers, and semiquavers, while above all is woven a network of progressions becoming little by little more complicated. At the thirty-seventh bar, the Death motive acts as a ground bass, and then the Hell theme reigns for a like space, after which that signifying Earth and Sea resumes and continues to the end. We shall attempt neither analysis nor description of the music superimposed upon these foundations, for we doubt if the closest study of the pianoforte score would satisfactorily disclose the composer's intended effect. *St. John* continues, "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God," &c, the recitative leading to a double chorus, wherein the saved and the lost express their trembling trust and mortal dread. Nothing can be simpler than the construction of this chorus, as a quotation from the opening bars of each choir will show. The saved thus begin—

No. 21.

p O Lord, I trust in Thee: let me not be made a - sham-ed.

and the lost follow on in marked, though by no means dramatic, contrast:—

No. 22.

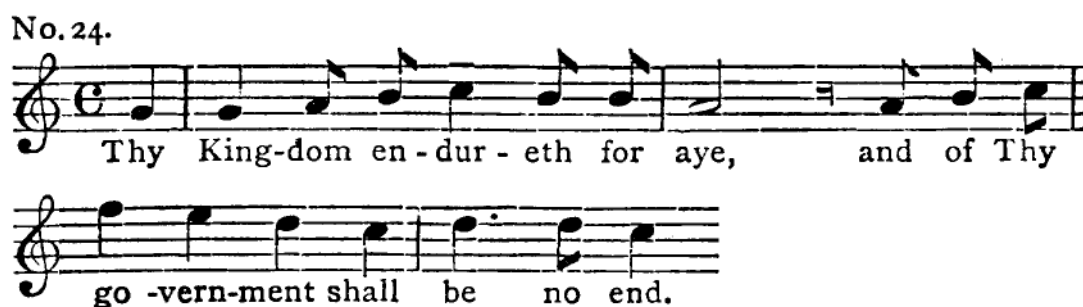
O Lord, strive not with me in Thy wrath, nei -
- ther af - flict me in Thy sore dis - plea - sure.

There are a few short *ensemble* passages, but generally the plan of the chorus is antiphonal. The effect, we should add, must be great, and all the more impressive because no straining after it appears. Resuming his recitative, *St. John* describes the Judgment scene, the themes representative of Death and Hell accompanying his reference to the lake of fire. This introduces

yet another Intermezzo, "The Judgment" (*Adagio*, F major). From the midst of a sustained tremolando, high up in the scale of the strings, the Throne theme issues forth, and is obviously meant to embody the invitation, "Come, ye blessed," &c, since it is followed by a series of flowing passages full of grace and beauty, sustained by a tonic pedal, and gradually ascending to the heights, as it were, of heaven. These ended, the tremolando resumes, but now low down, while the Throne theme is heard in sombre tones and in a minor key. Immediately the Hell motive appears, and groanings and wailings pervade the orchestra—



though, happily, not for long. We shall not discuss the taste of all this, nor measure the achievement by the exigences of so tremendous a subject, preferring to pass on to an Arioso and Chorus of Thanksgiving (*Adagio*, C major), "Gracious and merciful is the Lord." The Arioso is brief and not especially remarkable, while in the chorus Raff again draws upon his scholastic resources. Here is the subject chosen for strict fugal treatment—



and developed with fluency and effect, especially on a long-lasting pedal-point, but without employing the more elaborate devices of the form used. The Yorkshire singers will revel in this chorus. It cannot fail to remind them of the straightforwardness of their favourite Handel.

The last part, "New World," begins with an orchestral movement (*Andante*, B flat), having three subjects, of which the first is decidedly the most representative, and that alone calls for quotation:—



[Musical example continued...]



The others present no very marked contrast, but the movement like its forerunners becomes increasingly elaborate towards the end. *St. John* next recites his vision of the new heaven and new earth, former things having passed away. After this, the impersonal voice already heard, sings an air, "Lo ! the tabernacle of God is with men " (*Adagio*, E major). The air is hardly less simple than that sung by the Apostle at the beginning of the work, while it shows an equal regard for orthodox form. Though very melodious and pleasing no purpose would be served by extracts. A chorus of praise and thanksgiving naturally follows (*Allegretto* , C major), and is developed into a number of great importance. Here the composer, by way of change, makes little use of contrapuntal device, preferring plain harmonised phrases. The second section has, however, a very distinctive feature. Choral-like themes are sung in full vocal harmony without accompaniment, each in turn being echoed by the orchestra, with a vigorous bass counterpoint, as thus :—

No. 26.



[Musical example continued...]



Presently voices and orchestra combine in a repetition of the choral prior to a reappearance of the first subject. This number will certainly rank among the finest in the work. Before *St. John's* narrative is resumed, the Throne theme is heard, leading to a very short recitative, and a bass air (*Larghetto*, A major) "Lo! I make all things new," in which there are some picturesque and suggestive episodes—a light play of accompaniment, for example, on the words "I will give to the thirsty fountains of living waters," and the clang of victorious trumpets at reference to the reward of him that overcometh. The air is followed by a chorus (*Larghetto*, E major), "The redeemed of the Lord shall arise and come with singing unto Zion." Imitation is largely used in the first part of this chorus, short, melodious phrases being taken up by voice after voice, while the orchestra binds all together in the most charming manner. Especially may the treatment of the passage "Sorrow and sighing shall flee away" be commended for grace and tenderness. Another chorus follows, but though numbered separately, is a sequel or coda to the first. Its words are: "Come; yes, come. Come now Redeemer," and the music deserves note for its peculiar and impressive harmonic progressions.

The Finale of the whole work now appears in the shape of a chorus, "The grace of our Lord be with us all, Amen." This is ushered in by the orchestra with the second theme (Ex. 2) of the Introduction, treated in fugue form, and continued till the coda is reached, as quite an independent part of the number. Upon it, however, is imposed the same theme as the vocal fugue, but "augmented," so that we have two fugues with the same subject proceeding simultaneously. An extract beginning with the entrance of the leading voice will show this better than words:—

No. 27.

Theme augmented.

The grace of our . . . Lord . . .

Theme 8ves.

[Musical example continued...]

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system features a vocal line in treble clef with the lyrics "be with us" and a piano accompaniment in G major. The piano part includes a section labeled "Theme." The second system features a vocal line with the lyrics "all." and a piano accompaniment, ending with a section labeled "&c.".

The somewhat extended coda is full of vigour, and ends with impressive effect a remarkable work.

In what Raff's Oratorio is remarkable the reader hardly needs telling, but we may summarise its more striking features: First, the slight use made of vocal arias; second, the vast importance given to orchestral movements; third, the amplified employment of representative themes; fourth, the close association of free, modern writing for the orchestra, with contrapuntal choruses of the old-fashioned type. For the discussion of these points as well as for determining the place of the work, a better opportunity will arise. Enough now, if attention has been secured for a serious and musicianly effort.