

Joachim Raff

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

Symphony No. 8 “Frühlingsklänge” Opus 205

Between the years 1859 and 1879 Joachim Raff composed eleven symphonies. This is remarkable given their size, scope and consistently high quality especially considering that they were not the only major works (orchestral or otherwise) written during the same period. Unofficially, however, we may need to consider two additions to the list. The first, a “lost” Symphony in E-minor, WoO 18 (1854), two of whose movements live on in Raff’s orchestral Suite #1, Opus 101 (1863), and the other, a full fledged symphony in form and content save for the fact that it was written for 10 instruments. This “Sinfonietta,” Opus 188 (1873) as Raff called it, may be the first such composition of its type, not only because of the use of the term (implying a small scale symphony) as much as for its instrumentation which took the more traditional outdoor Austrian serenade and transformed it into a serious symphonic enterprise. Now inasmuch as one of these unofficial works is lost, and the other is referred to in diminutive (and unnumbered) terms, we should restrict our considerations to and, at the same time, take stock of some of the salient characteristics of the official sequence of eleven. Ultimately, we will take a closer look at two in particular, one of which is the text of the present edition.

Conventional opinion has it that Raff’s Symphonies fall into two general categories, specifically, titled, or program works, and untitled abstract compositions. The fact that Raff gives titles not only to eight of them, but also to most of the individual movements contained therein suggests that he should be placed within the program music camp. However, the exact nature of, as well as the relationship between the extrinsic programmatic elements and the intrinsic musical substance of his symphonies is, for the present, an open question. What is objectively closer to the matter is that these aforementioned groups are more clearly distinguished by their relative performing durations and general dimensions as by the fact that Raff, who was never content to repeat himself from one type of composition to the next, had the creative instinct to shift gears rather consistently between longer and shorter works throughout the course of his career as a composer of symphonies.

The first group consists of works longer than forty minutes in performance, the second of symphonies having durations of between thirty and thirty-five minutes. Taken together, and in order of composition the sequence of symphonies appears thus: #1 [An das Vaterland] (longer), #2 (shorter), #3 [Im Walde] (longer), #4 (shorter), #5 [Leonore] (longer), #6 (shorter), #7 [In den Alpen] (longer), #11 (8) [Der Winter] (shorter), #8 (9) [Frühlingsklänge] (longer), #9 (10) [In Sommer] (longer), #10 (11) [Im Herbstzeit] (shorter). Generally, the shorter works tend to be the more “difficult” symphonies – their terse presentation and more compact shapes being at odds with the prevalent gigantism that was becoming characteristic of much music of the later 19th century. The more expansive symphonies, taking the long view, are no less compact in construction if generally more leisurely in their manner and broader than the others in their outlines. It should be noted that there are both long and short “titled” symphonies, but no long “untitled” ones.

For all their diversity of external subject matter, Raff’s instrumentation remains consistent from first to last. Except for an occasional piccolo, Raff never uses any auxiliary woodwinds. Indeed, the normal Raffian configuration consists of 2 (sometimes 3) flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons. The brass consists exclusively of 4 horns, 2 trumpets and 3 trombones (never a tuba). Percussion consists of timpani and (when they appear) triangle and/or snare drum. While the

strings will frequently be divided, or used in concertante style (soli with ripieni) no use is made of other, non-conventional string instruments (i.e. harp, piano). The remarkable thing about this relatively restricted scope is that Raff regularly and predictably wrings the most varied colors and textures from his orchestra. Instrumental color for Raff is as primary a compositional element as “melody,” “harmony,” and “rhythm.” Keeping in mind his earlier work with Liszt’s tone poems, all of which utilize larger, more complex instrumentation, Raff learned how to achieve a similar variety of color, texture, and polyphonic density with more modest forces. Aside from purely practical performance considerations, making a smaller ensemble sound larger than it is in actuality is a far more difficult thing to bring off, yet Raff does it with Mozartean ease and legerdemain. His facility with the orchestra makes him very much the equal of near contemporaries such as Rimsky Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Berlioz and Wagner as an orchestral colorist. Yet throughout the entire cycle of symphonies, the orchestra never sounds like it could be anything but a Raffian orchestra.

Externally, at least, Raff maintains the traditional four movement structure of the mid-century symphony. But this is a very deceptive observation because one learns early on that nothing in a Raff symphony is as simple or as obvious as it might appear to be at first blush. Each work has its own individual character and approach to form and content. They are all unpredictable, fresh and exciting. This latter point is of interest to us here inasmuch as Raff’s most individual work, the one that should have been Symphony #8 but which was published posthumously as Symphony #11, sparked in reaction the composition of its opposite, which is known as #8.

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In the Spring of 1876, Joachim Raff composed what now stands as *Der Winter*, the original eighth Symphony, in A minor. This extremely concentrated work follows *In den Alpen* (Symphony #7), Raff’s most extrovert symphony, but strikes out new directions. Taking its title to heart, the first movement, *Der erste Schnee* (The first snow), is an agitated, bleak and difficult musical landscape, more a snowstorm than a gentle tinkling of snowflakes. Bare, pithy motives, themes laden with remorse and grief along with a goodly portion of syncopation, as well as whole sections of highly embellished figuration and fugal counterpoint swirl around in an almost expressionistic (!) stream of consciousness. Fragments of ideas interrupt each other in distracted monologue. Even the harmonic language includes some near atonal digressions placed side by side with straining diatonicism. It is one of Raff’s darkest and, in certain respects, most complex symphonic movements. Events happen within a very compressed, almost anamorphic sense of time.

The second movement, in the parallel key of A major, has a proto-Tchaikovskian formality and brittle glitter to it, seemingly anticipating the mode and methods of the ballets (*Swan Lake*, would not be performed until February, 1877). Contextually resembling a gavotte, the movement consists of a theme and five variations which progress towards A minor, and eventually focus on the swirling snow of the first movement. The trio, which emerges out of the snow, so to say, attempts to add a more positive, C major hymnal aspect, but is quickly subsumed by the gloom of C minor. What little of the theme returns afterwards appears in A minor. The last minute shift back to A major seems more an emotional whimper than anything else. Its abruptness is worthy of Sibelius. Curiously, Raff did not give a title to this movement, possibly because its very diverse, contradictory character defied specific literary appellation.

The third movement, *Au Camin* (At the Fireplace) moves to the distantly related mediant tonality of F major (relative to the second movement’s A major, that is). Here, Raff combines an unlikely barcarolle-like strumming in the strings with elaborate fugato in the winds, a very unusual musical construct notwithstanding its more lyrical central episodes. Later, the roles are reversed so that while the winds “strum,” the strings “fugue” even as the earlier, passionate lyricism is also restated. Like the second movement, however, it ends rather abruptly.

The fourth movement, *Carnevale*, seems to resemble Tchaikovsky yet again, specifically the finale of his 2nd (“Little Russian”) Symphony both in tone and procedure. Keep in mind, though,

that the final version Tchaikovsky's Symphony was not written until 1879, by which point Raff's piece had already laid on the shelf, unperformed, for some three years. Furthermore, Raff had, in the meantime, written three other symphonies! The ballet aspect recurs in this final movement, too, with highly disjunct and often jarring shifts in perspective. Raff changes keys, key signatures, instrumental colors, thematic materials and meters as if constructing a rapid-fire cinematic montage. In the end, the movement builds up a tremendous head of steam before exploding in a joyous and noisy A major conclusion.

Upon completion of this symphony, Raff put the score away, and neither submitted it for publication nor performance. It remained thus until the conductor, Max Erdmannsdörfer, a friend of Raff's, took the manuscript to C. F. W. Siegel's Musikalienhandlung in Leipzig who published it posthumously (i.e. *nachgelassenes Werke*) in 1883. Conventional accounts have it that Erdmannsdörfer "completed and revised" what was thought to be an unfinished piece. I suspect that Erdmannsdörfer, acting on his friend's behalf, only saw to the details of publication and proof reading of what was now called Symphony #11, Opus 214, along with producing the expected four hand piano transcription. The symphony itself, for all its dark character, is pure Raff from first note to last, indeed, in spite of many startling differences when compared to the seven that preceded it. Ultimately, it may have been the very unusual nature of the piece itself which may have brought Raff to the realization that it would, perhaps, alienate his audience. In light of the fact that Raff's public career was already beginning to falter, this may be the reason why he decided to suppress the work altogether. However, even if self-recognition of the difficulty of this work is at the crux of Raff's "creative crisis," it is important to note that he did not destroy the score. We are all the better for it.

Within three months of completing the first eighth symphony, Raff set about composing the next one, *Frühlingsklänge* (Sounds of Spring), ultimately the "real" eighth. But, having now crossed the threshold into the expressionistic, free flowing world of the *durchkomponiert* (through-composed) methods of the suppressed Winter symphony, many of its constructs and concepts would emerge in other ways in the remaining three symphonies Raff would live to complete. The Second Violin Concerto, from the same period, and also in A minor shows a certain not so casual disregard for conventional structures while similarly espousing a very relativistic attitude towards dramatic form and the metamorphosis of its materials, even as its exterior manner is warmer.

The *Frühlingsklänge* symphony was written during the Summer and Fall of 1876. Like its unnumbered predecessor, the new symphony is also in four movements, but here all of them titled. In virtually every respect, the new work represents a diametrical shift from the corresponding movements of *Der Winter*. Even at the level of choice of keys for the individual movements, the conscious act of reversal is evident. Where the original eighth's first movement is unequivocally in A minor, the new eighth's first movement, *Frühlings Rückkehr* (Spring's Return), while also beginning in A minor, moves from uncertainty into sun bright A major in fairly short order. From this point on, all is ease and grace, not grit and grief. To an even greater extent than its counterpart in *Der Winter*, this movement virtually defines *durchkomponiert* simply as a function of the manner of its very leisurely and seamless flow. Here, as a compositional principle, a single figure within a given idea gradually consumes its source and then morphs into the next thematic element. This aural equivalent of the cinematic dissolve happens over and over again throughout the movement. One is hardly aware that externally at least, Raff maintains the superstructure of sonata form. Along the way, Raff presents a number of extremely varied ideas, all of which evolve out of something and into the next.

The original second movement scherzo was in the parallel A major with very dark C minor digressions. The new second movement, *In der Walpurgisnacht*, shifts to the parallel A minor and begins on more familiar territory for Raff – the hobgoblin scherzo. Unlike the original second movement which began right off with a clearly defined theme, the new movement begins indistinctly with bits and scraps of materials which only very gradually coalesce into clear thematic statements and tonality. Further along, it picks up strains of Leonore's dactylic horseman's ride and horn calls along with a host of other new details. The constant shift in perspective and focus, coming here on the heels of the rejected eighth symphony, is more than

coincidental. During all the hustle and bustle, grotesquerie and misterioso, and aside from some very direct but sly references to the swirling snow of the second movement of the original symphony, one of Raff's most muscular and passionate tunes begins to show itself by degrees. Along with this happens a much truncated recapitulation that ultimately permits the tune to emerge in full Technicolor display with all the stops pulled. Harmonized modally by moving back and forth between the tonic A major, the minor dominant (E minor), the minor subdominant (D minor), the lowered 6th (F-major), and lowered 7th (G minor), Raff achieves a very distinctly Spanish-Moorish harmonic flavor quite unlike anything in contemporary German music. At its end, though, it is swamped by an all consuming A minor coda in what must be one of Raff's most virtuoso displays of orchestral fury.

As the original third movement moved down a third from A major to F major, the new third, *Mit dem ersten Blumenstrauß* (With the first bouquets), does the opposite by moving up from A minor to C major. Unlike the original third movement's unusually constructed textures and polyphonic layering, the new movement is all lyricism and restrained but straightforward romantic arioso. Raff reduces his orchestra by eliminating the trumpets, trombones and timpani. Indeed, in its 256 measures, the full orchestra is used in barely one measure! Most of the movement inhabits a realm that appears to have descended from a Schumann lied, but which otherwise is of pure Raffian design. "Intimacy" is the key word here. But here, too, as in *Der Winter*, one senses pre-echoes of Tchaikovsky, especially in the antiphonal writing between the strings and the winds, and even within the winds (i.e. horns and bassoons vs. flutes, oboes and clarinets). Sometimes it is by phrase, sometimes by measure, and at other times within a measure. The central section moves again by a mediant relationship downwards to A-flat major (very far away from the A major principal tonality of the symphony) reaching several minor climaxes along the way. At some points all sense of tonality is lost – Raff relies heavily on common tone modulations, a device frequently heard in Russian music descended from Borodin, especially later on in Glazunov and Rimsky-Korsakov. Raff's intimacy reaches its zenith in the very long but exquisitely beautiful coda during which he creates the effect of harp harmonics using a single flute and pizzicato second violins in unison on the dominant G, ringing like a distant bell. Below this, divided first violins and divided violas with the cellos coming in only at the very end, and with occasional assistance from other wind instruments, the music works its way through a long series of common tone modulations based on thematic fragments heard earlier in the movement, ultimately landing on the tonic C major.

Now as the original finale moved up a third from F major to A major, the new finale, *Wanderlust* (Moving desire), moves down a third to A major by way of C major, then E major, and finally to A major. Here, as in the original finale, Raff's eastern European (read: Russian) prescience seems to point more towards wind and brass writing that would be quite at home in an early Glazunov symphony, or Rimsky-Korsakov with its Scheherazade-like swirling strings. Having said that, though, keep in mind that Raff had already completed all of his symphonies before Glazunov had written any of his (and Rimsky's suite was more than twelve years ahead)!

Raff begins his finale exactly where the third movement left off, that is, with the "ringing of distant bells." Now, however, the tone has shifted to E which functions both as the third of C major (the previous movement) as well as the dominant of the new movement, A major. These "new bells" have been transformed from a distant unison into more forceful octaves. Gradually, wisps of triplets, and bits and pieces of thematic ideas evolve into swirling stringified triplets and insistent woodwind rhythms, a process seemingly borrowed from the second movement.

Although accumulating a good deal of dramatic thrust with all these divergent musical ideas, and while appearing to aim at a big statement of some kind, curiously Raff avoids the arrival point as well as any clear footing in the tonic key, a device he would utilize again almost immediately in the 2nd Violin Concerto as a structural principle. The delay in establishing the tonic is put off until much later in the movement. By the end of the exposition of this sonata form structure the tonality does indeed come to a more definite arrival, but it is in the dominant key, E. Later on, the unambiguous tonic arrival occurs after the original expository material has been adjusted during its recapitulation. It is only at the full orchestral statement 475 measures into the movement that A major is finally established without question. This is characteristic of Raff's very devious sense

of humor, where things “sound” normal enough except for the fact that they are really all over the map. Another very curious and, ultimately, forward looking aspect to the entire movement is its sense of multiple temporal layers. The triple meter overall is marked $mm=80$ to the dotted half note, that is. This tempo is slow enough so that it can be “felt” as in “one to the bar” – but not so slow that the tripartite triplets, on one hand, and the opposing fandango rhythm (a quarter followed by four eighths – the same rhythmic signature, in retrograde, as in the 2nd Violin Concerto) on the other can not also be felt as a very fast “three.” It’s quite the opposite effect of the finale of Der Winter with its thick, heavy booted duplets (even with alternate triple meter, or duple meter triplets). There, one has the sense of cinematic (or balletic) fragmentation, here one feels a seamless flow where different layers come in and out of focus.

Ultimately, though, Raff saves one last bit of humor for the end. By the time the recapitulation disintegrates, there is yet another 300 measures, nearly half a movement remaining! This very long coda might be a second development, but is actually of a series of Haydnesque false endings, each one seeming to bring the movement to a conclusion, but then trailing off in another direction. Finally, after the arrival of *più mosso*, the symphony does get to its expected wind-up before landing on a well earned A major resolution.

The score of *Frühlingsklänge* was originally published by C. F. W. Siegel’s Musikalienhandlung in Leipzig in 1877.

Dr. Avrohom Leichtling, 2004

For performance material please contact the publisher Kistner und Siegel, Cologne. Reprint of a copy from the Musikbibliothek der Münchener Stadtbibliothek, Munich.