

Joachim Raff

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

Orchestral Prelude to Shakespeare's "Macbeth" (1879)

In a career that saw the composition of nearly three hundred works in virtually every conceivable form, it is interesting to note that Joachim Raff (1822-1882) did not produce a single symphonic tone poem. Given that his catalogue contains at least 40 non-vocal works with poetic titles or allusions (to say nothing of individual movement titles), the absence of this most fundamental of 19th century Romantic forms presents a fascinating anomaly.

Without, for the moment, examining the issues pertaining to his use of conventional versus unconventional formal structures within the context of program music itself, in the main, Raff's programmatic works tend to fall into the more generic areas of smaller character pieces, or broadly descriptive major compositions. Titles such as "Ode au Printemps," "L'amour de Fée," "In den Alpen," "Frühlingsklänge," "Frühlingsboten", "Vom Rhein", "Blätter und Blüten", "Reisebilder", "Abends Rhapsodie", "Zur Herbstzeit," "Von der Swäbischen Alb", "Im Sommer", "Der Winter," do not tell stories, or express great philosophical, metaphysical, or political ideas and ideals. They give, rather, the more general sense of the emotive content of the pieces which they adorn. They keep more to the spirit of Beethoven's famous aphorism, *Mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Mahlerey* (More expression of the feeling than painting).

Furthermore, Raff tended to be unsympathetic to that aspect of German romanticism which was inexorably headed towards the *fin de siècle* hyper-emotionalism. Indeed, for all the deceptive surface conventionalities of his manner, his gaze was clearly well beyond the more dominant trends in music of the period. In contradistinction to many of his contemporaries, Raff placed great stock in sly, discrete humor and highly refined intellectualism. This apparent anomaly is singularly curious in light of his early professional association with Franz Liszt where, among other things, he was instrumental in preparing the orchestrations of several of the older composer's symphonic poems. Yet for his apparent avoidance of the form, Raff's work is replete with the earmarks of the program music aesthetic, even if these are largely restricted to the use of suggestive titles for whole pieces, or movements within them.

Raff, together with many other composers of his day, was attracted to the writings of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) whose plays and sonnets became subjects for operas, symphonic poems, lieder, character pieces and incidental music throughout the 19th century. In German speaking countries, this would certainly have been facilitated by the so-called Schlegel-Tieck translation which had been completed in 1833, and which effectively raised Shakespeare's status to a level of importance equal to Schiller and Goethe. In Raff's case, the most hidden Shakespearean reference occurs in the scherzo of his 9th Symphony ("Im Sommer") where the specific reference to "A Midsummer Night's Dream" takes the form of a solo viola and a solo 'cello. In this unprecedented instance, the duet is clearly marked in the score such that the viola is labeled "Titania" – rather than viola solo, and the 'cello is labeled "Oberon" – rather than solo cello, even though no words spoken by either character in the play are actually quoted in the score. A listener unaware of this might think, for a moment, that he had fallen into the middle of "Don Quixote," that distinctly un-Shakespearean tone poem of Richard Strauss. But, of course, this work would not be written until 1897, whereas Strauss' own symphonic poem, *Macbeth* (1887-1890), would have a distinctly Raffian energy and objective brusqueness to it!

Raff's most specific extra-musical literary adventure, aside from the explicit reference to Gottfried August Bürger's *Leonore* (1773) (i.e. the 5th Symphony of 1872), comes down to us as 4 Shakespeare-Ouverturen composed in 1879, during his tenure as director of the Hoch

Conservatory of Music in Frankfurt. In that year, Raff also wrote the Suite for Violin and Piano, Opus 210, *Welt-Ende – Gericht – Neue Welt*, Opus 212, *Symphony #10*, Opus 213, *Aus der Adventzeit*, Opus 216 and *Frühlingslied*, WoO 49. The four overtures, in order of composition, are *Der Sturm* (The Tempest), in G minor, WoO 50, *Macbeth*, in C minor, WoO 51, *Romeo und Julie* (Romeo and Juliet), ultimately in D minor, WoO 52, and *Othello*, in D minor, WoO 53. Although Raff probably did not intend the four works to be played together as a suite, they continue the line of formal innovations that characterize the last four symphonies, indeed much of Raff's music of the 1870s. Specifically, they make use of highly fragmented, seminally expressionistic dramatic formal progressions in what are essentially *durchkomponiert* (through-composed) constructions. In the present set of pieces, Raff finally abandons all pretence at sonata-form and closed ternary types by making an incredible stylistic leap into what can only be described as a species of structural cubism in which pieces are built out of the recurrent juxtaposition of blocks of materials. In many respects, these pieces leave the 19th century far behind even as they continue to utilize fundamentally tonal syntax. The effect, especially in *Macbeth*, is thoroughly disturbing, jarring and, for all the sweeping lines and passing swipes at more conventional lyricism, not so much post-romantic as utterly anti-romantic. Of the many aspects of Raff's musical persona, the very strong tendency towards emotional objectivity comes to full fruition here.

At his death in 1882, Raff left a number of works that were either unperformed and/or unpublished. The four Shakespeare Overtures fall into both categories. Even though *Der Sturm* and *Macbeth* would be performed during his lifetime (*Der Sturm* on 4 February 1881 in Weisbaden conducted by Louis Lüstner, who consistently championed Raff's works, and *Macbeth*, similarly, under Lüstner almost a year later on 13 January 1882), *Romeo und Julie* would not be premiered until a year and a half after Raff's passing, again conducted by Lüstner in Wiesbaden on 4 January 1884. (It was later performed in London conducted by Hans Richter.) *Othello* would have to wait until the late 20th century for a first hearing.

It was only in 1891 that Raff's former pupil, the American Edward MacDowell, was able to arrange for the publication of *Romeo and Macbeth* by the Boston (USA) firm of Arthur P. Schmidt. This publisher, like many of his day, maintained offices in Europe, in this case, in Leipzig. Schmidt, probably on instruction from MacDowell, lists the four works as "Four Shakespeare-Ouverturen," even though Raff's titles for each begin with the words "Orchester-Vorspiel zu... ." Doubtless this arises from the fact that the meaning of the English words *Prelude* and *Overture* are effectively synonymous, even though an overture is not necessarily a prelude to a play or an opera. Raff's use of the term *Vorspiel* suggests that he intended them specifically as introductions to the four plays, not as symphonic poems per se. MacDowell, who was nineteen years old when these pieces were written, and thirty-one when The U S Library of Congress recorded the copyright in his name, doubtless understood the special nature of the four *vorspiele*, sensing in them something considerably more than mere preludes – and this may explain his choice of the word *Overture*. In any case, the particular production of *Macbeth* that Raff must have imagined would indeed have been extraordinary judging by the composition bearing its name.

What, then, are the salient characteristics of the four works in general, and *Macbeth* in particular? How do their formal procedures and emotional shapes compare to the "standard issue" symphonic poem? Judging by the examples of Liszt, Tchaikovsky and Richard Strauss, then, we would expect to have works written for larger, rather than smaller orchestras encompassing a fairly wide range of emotive states, tempi and forms. Many of Liszt's symphonic poems are based on extended sonata forms. Strauss will utilize variations (*Don Quixote*), sonata forms (*Macbeth*, *Don Juan*), rondo types (*Till Eulenspiegel*), multisectional aggregates (*Also Sprach Zarathustra*, *Alpensymphonie*). All of them, however, tend to be unified by a small group of primary musical ideas whose development constitutes the essential structural element in their various applications. Raff, true to form, discards the entire kit and caboodle!

In place of a large (or larger) orchestra, Raff maintains his standard instrumental ensemble: 2 Flutes, Piccolo, 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 4 Horns, 2 Trumpets, 3 Trombones, Timpani,

Snare Drum, Strings. The longest of the four, *Der Sturm*, which resembles *Macbeth* in its construction and method, is in the vicinity of fourteen minutes in duration. The shortest, *Romeo und Julie*, is approximately nine minutes long, less than half the duration of Tchaikovsky's work on the same subject. In this one piece, at least, Raff espouses a more traditional romantic emotional climate. In place of a welter of tempos, Raff establishes a primary *Allegro*, and then maintains it (with relatively minor adjustments on either side of the starting point) all the way through. In place of long expository statements, elaborate thematic ideas and counterpoint, Raff assembles a collection of self-contained musical statements that are pithier by a mile than the average Wagnerian leit-motif. However, it is in the matter of formal layout, particularly in *Macbeth*, that Raff's four *vorspiele* differ most radically from all other models and examples. Raff does not so much develop his materials as he uses them largely as fixed, completely self-contained epigrammatic character blocks which are juggled and presented in numerous sequential combinations roughly mimicking the dramatic arches of the plays they represent.

Romeo und Julie is not so much a condensation of the action of play as of its situation. Similarly, *Othello* is more concerned with the fact of the title character's tragic love for Desdemona and the conflict with Iago. Its opening is one of the early examples of bi-tonality making use as it does of an upward moving oscillation between D major and A-flat major. This remarkable passage bares a spooky and uncanny resemblance to the opening of "Mercury, the Winged Messenger," the third movement of Gustav Holst's suite "The Planets," written in 1914, both materially as well as harmonically. This fact alone is astonishing considering that *Othello* was not heard in public until the 1980s, it is surmised, when Werner Andreas Albert conducted The Philharmonia Hungarica in a series of performances and recordings of Raff's symphonies and other orchestral pieces! Its primary tritone shifting motive also pre-dates Stravinsky's use of the same device in "Petrouchka" by a good thirty years! *Der Sturm* is built out of a number of shorter episodes that are as much quick sketches of the characters and their general circumstances as anything. It resembles *Macbeth* in procedure even as its musical materials are fewer in number.

In *Macbeth*, however, we have the greatest break with symphonic tradition, indeed with the entire program music aesthetic. It is easily one of the most original pieces Raff ever composed even though it is completely in keeping with formal and developmental models he had been promulgating all along, but especially since the composition of *Der Winter* (1876). It is, however, probably the single most difficult piece of Raff's to reconcile structurally since its method is without precedent in 19th century musical rhetoric. We will have to look way forward in time to the world of film music, specifically the process of charting out the progression of musical episodes that match exactly with a succession of given on-screen actions, to understand exactly how Raff constructed this remarkably prescient piece.

Imagine, if you will, Shakespeare's great five act drama being condensed into an eleven minute long newsreel, or flashback sequence in which there is barely time to expose the characters, the situations, or the overall dramatic scope of the play. Instead of complete scenes, you have the briefest of excerpts. Instead of character study, you have rapid intercut montage showing facial expressions, a gesture or two, or maybe even a title card saying "Macbeth's gloom" or "Lady Macbeth's connivance." Mood is suggested by lighting and shadow – think Fritz Lang as in "Metropolis." Overlaid on all of this are appropriately brief musical passages that match, shot for shot, the screen action. Continuity, paradoxically, will be established here as a function of discontinuity, fragmentation, and pointillism. These, then, are both descriptions of the component musical elements as well as their manner of presentation. Raff has replaced development by extension, elaboration and combination with forward dramatic movement by juxtaposition, fragmentation and transposition. Material statement is too brief to be considered exposition in the conventional sense. Indeed, given its extra-musical nature, exposition occurs at several places during the piece, not all of it at the beginning. Recapitulation as such does not exist any more than development does even in an unexpected manner. The musical resolution occurs only when one motive, Duncan's, is given a fully fleshed out setting, not merely a "restatement," in the tonic major tonality.

In the course of a piece which is barely 350 measures long, Raff presents no less than twelve

different completely self-contained, independent musical ideas. Introduced by no more than a two measure long C-minor triad in the trombones and horns, the piece divides into two parts. The first of these, largely in C-minor, presents the The Witches, Macbeth, Banquo, Duncan, Macduff, Malcolm and Lady Macbeth. The second part, largely in C-major, focuses on the battle between Macduff and Macbeth, Macbeth's death and the ascension of Malcolm to the throne of Scotland. Throughout the whole piece, there is a constant shifting of meters between 4 and 3.

The longest and most elaborate of the musical portraits is concerned with The Witches which, at 23 measures, displays Raff's penchant for demonic portraiture such as is commonly found in many of the symphonies. It is the most complex, having a number of smaller sections which shift between implied 12/8 and 4/4, while also containing some extremely adventurous harmonic movement (see Othello, above). Macbeth's signature, so to say, is a gruff and four-square four measure phrase that also contains references to The Witches' tritones. Lady Macbeth's signature is six measures of downward chromatic sequential slither that is always accompanied by correspondingly oblique augmented motion. The resultant effect is virtual atonality, and is closely related thematically to the The Witches' motives. The themes representing Banquo, Macduff and Duncan are more "militant" in character, are closely related thematically, but also in 3/4. It thus becomes easier to hear which character is "in the shot." As the piece progresses, the various thematic bits are played off against each other, either in their totality, or in recognizable fragments, or in very brief extensions that also serve modulatory functions. There is very little simultaneous overlapping or intertwining of the materials. The most elaborate development occurs in a seventeen measure long passage describing Macbeth's defeat by Macduff (measure 300, et seq.) in which fragments of both motives are thrown back and forth and repeated over and over using almost the exact same technology as Raff devised for the hunt music in the last movement of the F-minor symphony (Zur Herbstzeit, written in the same year). The corresponding parallel section in the first part of the piece (measure 207, et seq.), a dark and gloomy passage, stretches Macbeth's motive almost beyond recognition. There is even an eight bar long unaccompanied solo for snare drum which announces the battle between Macbeth and Macduff. In the end, Duncan's four measure signature is given a glorious extension to eleven measures thus ending the highly condensed overview of the play on a note of exaltation.

Having now alluded to the fact that this piece, to a startling degree, resembles a film score, I have assembled a diagram as would be used as a cue sheet for a composer writing for such a film as Raff's piece might be intended. Obviously, Raff could not have known about the cinema in any way, shape or form. After all, it would be one Charles H. Duell in his capacity as Commissioner of the U S Patent Office who would declare, in 1899, "Everything that can be invented, has been invented." Notwithstanding this remarkable prophecy, Raff's method here presages the technique known in the industry as "Mickey Mousing" (from the early Walt Disney cartoons of the 1930s), of matching music to visual cues in a film frame by frame. But this is, after all, the explicit province of genius – to imagine the unimaginable, or to conceive the inconceivable. Even in music. Indeed, when preparing the notes for this preface, I began by cataloguing Raff's various musical motives, and also identifying where they occur in the score. When the results were sorted by their starting and ending points, the result accounted for every measure of the piece from first to last, as if each entry corresponded to a musical sequence in a film (down to a frame-level count) without so much as a single gap! This "cue sheet" is presented below. Its very content illustrates better than any running narrative or analysis how far Raff had, in this one piece, leapt way beyond his time and well into the 20th century.

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