

Joseph Joachim Raff

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

Octet in C major (1872)

During the forty-one years of creative activity between 1841 and 1882, and judging solely by the number of works to reach completion per year, there came two extremely productive periods in Joachim Raff's career. The years 1844 through 1849 saw the composition of seventy works, compared to the ninety-nine written in the decade between 1867 and 1876. The earlier period, for its relatively greater number of completed pieces, was limited exclusively to solo keyboard compositions and lieder which could easily be classified as smaller in scope.

Taking stock of just the major works of the latter period, one finds three full length operas, seven symphonies, three of the four orchestral suites and two other miscellaneous orchestral works, five concerted works, and three works for chorus and orchestra. Altogether this represents an astonishing accomplishment for any composer, let alone for Raff even if he had not written anything else during the period. But when one realizes there were seventy-seven additional pieces composed during this time one marvels at the sheer volume, musical worth and inventiveness (to say nothing of the physical effort) represented by the totality of Raff's accomplishment.

Within the remaining compositions of this period, five of his nine String Quartets, the two Piano Quartets, two of the four Piano Trios, the Cello Sonata in D major, Opus 183, the Fifth Violin Sonata, in C minor, Opus 145 and Volker, the tone poem for Violin and Piano, Opus 203, constitute the bulk of Raff's important chamber music.

Towards the middle of this intensely active decade Raff composed the most delightful and thoroughly engaging Octet in C major, Opus 176, for 4 violins, 2 violas, and 2 cellos. Followed by the "Leonore" Symphony (#5), Opus 177, the Octet's size, scope, and manner presents another instance in the pattern of reversals frequently found in Raff's oeuvre. Where Leonore is second in length only to Symphony #1-"An das Vaterland", Opus 96, the Octet, at half its duration, contains not so much as an extra note. Where the symphony is as overtly emotive a piece of instrumental music as Raff ever wrote, the Octet is cool, playful and concise. Where the symphony dabbles with unusual forms and programmatically driven dramatic architecture, the Octet is virtually neo-classical in its formal layout and execution. But in spite of the obvious differences of scope and design, the manner of thematic exposition, development, harmonic progression and instrumental coloration are remarkably similar. Their composer's fingerprints are clearly etched in every measure of both works. Raff's alternation between the abstract, highly intelligent but clever piece of chamber music and the full blown "Romantic Program Symphony" would seem to have been no more difficult for him than changing pen points between pieces!

The Octet, composed in 1872 in Wiesbaden, was performed for the first time on a concert of the Allgemeinen deutschen Musikvereins on Tuesday morning, 15 April 1873 in the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. The ensemble was lead by the violinist and konzertmeister Johan Lauterbach to whom the composition was dedicated. It appeared in print in October, 1881, published by Ries & Erler (Berlin).

The work is cast in four complimentary movements. The first, a virtually orchestral Allegro in C major, a brief but tarantella-like scherzo in C minor, a tastefully songful but slightly kitsch-inflected cross between durchkomponiert variations and tripartite Andante in F major, and a knock-about C major final rondo that displays Raff's penchant for mixing "appropriately serious-minded themes and materials" with broad references to what Hugo Reimann derisively referred to as "Liedertafel," that is "naïve" thematic materials or shapes that would be more typical of university student songs, folk music or pop music types of the period. Parenthetically, one need only look to the orchestral suite "Aus Thüringen" of 1875 for another, similar example of this mixture of the "sacred and the profane" if but on a much larger scale. And one must not forget that Raff had absolutely no trouble shifting gears between "serious" pieces and salon music of the highest caliber. It was inevitable that the two extremes came together, or rubbed off on each other from time to time. In this one respect Raff rather resembles composers like Morton Gould or Malcolm Arnold (in the 20th century) who were equally at home, and thoroughly proficient on "both sides of the tracks." Taken from another perspective, though, the somewhat later folksong movement (as exemplified by Ralph Vaughan Williams, or Béla Bartok, for example) would find itself doing in the open what Raff often did by implication. Perhaps viewed as heterodox in its time, the intellectual strength of the music easily and, most importantly, effectively welds together what in lesser hands would be a bewildering assortment of sources. Taken altogether, it is a piece written as much for the joy of its own internal logic and humor as for the pure sport of virtuoso string players playing to their strengths.

One of the paradoxes of Joachim Raff's art is the dichotomy of its apparent surface conventionality and the consistent use of often complex, eclectic compositional means. None of Raff's orchestral works, for example, makes use of anything larger than what is essentially a Schubert-sized orchestra. However, the enormous variety of forms, sizes, shapes, durations and extramusical materials (when present), together with the aforementioned preponderant stylistic eclecticism guarantees that no two symphonies will be similar. In Raff's chamber music one finds a profusion of string quartets, piano trios, and piano quartets. From the standpoint of instrumental ensemble, they are conventional in disposition. Yet, as with the symphonies, there is the signal admixture of purely abstract, untitled movements and whole pieces alongside works of either an implicitly programmatic nature, or, in the case of several of the quartets, an explicitly neo-classical orientation. In a very fundamental way, these latter compositions would be more at home in the 20th century. Indeed, Raff must properly be acknowledged as one of the progenitors of the "neo-classic" movement that would find its first real flowering in the Stravinsky of *L'Histoire du Soldat* (1918) or *Pulcinella* (1919).

Prior to Raff's single opus, we find string octets by Anton Reicha, Franz Schubert (1824), Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1825), Niels Gade (1848), Woldemar Bargiel (circa 1850), and Johan Svendsen (1867) among others. Whereas it is not uncommon for a composer so inclined to write string quartets to produce more than one of them, the composition of string octets seemed to be limited to single instances. In the 20th century, Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) produced a single string octet which resulted from his having designed his fourteenth and fifteenth string quartets such that they could be played separately as quartets, or simultaneously as an octet! Antonin Dvořák's single octet, written around the same time as Raff's, is not known today as a chamber work. Dvořák, unsatisfied perhaps with the heaviness of its eight-part textures, reworked it into the *Serenade for String Orchestra in E major, Opus 22* in 1875.

Here we have an important clue which may help to explain the relative paucity of string octets in the literature. Eight string players together begin to sound less like chamber music, and more like a small orchestral string section. The natural inclination to make a bigger sound with more instruments can lead to problems that are peculiar to string instruments alone. A basic principle of orchestration invokes the unison doubling of parts both for volume and density. Pairs of string instruments playing in unison, however, present intonation problems resulting from simultaneously conflicting rates of vibrato. This can be neutralized somewhat by the addition of a third instrument to the unison (with the concomitant loss of an independent voice), or by octave coupling of the unison doubling. The latter will prove to be Raff's preferred method – as it is used straight off from the first measure. Conversely, the uniformity of sonority throughout the entire range and family of string instruments can lead to aural fatigue, especially when all eight parts are used with little or no relief. In the hands of a less experienced composer, the tendency to overscore will result in thick, suffocating textures. Perhaps the most famous work in the small octet literature, Mendelssohn's, suffers from problems of vertical bloat, unrelieved texture and the resultant "lack of breathing space."

Aside from avoiding the aforementioned manifest dangers, the "successful string octet" will need to take advantage of the totality of the string player's technical arsenal. The American composer Bernard Herrmann said of his score for Alfred Hitchcock's film "Psycho" (1960) "using the string orchestra alone..." [and often divided into eight or more parts] "...was like matching the black and white photography of the film with the black and white sound of strings." Herrmann, one of Raff's ardent supporters in the 1930s and 40s, and conductor of one of the early landmark recordings of a Raff symphony (Leonore), evidently learned a great deal about colorful black and white string writing as much from Raff as anyone else.

The first thirteen measures of the piece clearly demonstrate Raff's understanding of the medium. In these opening measures Raff presents no less than four or five different instrumental textures which also correspond to the principal materials of the piece. Interestingly, he uses the entire ensemble in all of four measures disbursed within the opening thirteen. No real "theme" as such is ever stated. The fragmentary nature of the ideas, along with an ascending pianissimo chromatic suffix, constitutes a very playful game of musical peek-a-boo. Where is the theme? More importantly, what is it? Is it the violas' and cellos' rhythmically syncopated, octave coupled unison upward thrust, followed by a downward moving but rhythmically straitlaced answer to the first two measures landing on "G" – with no two measures having the same rhythm? Is it the complimentary downwards, then upwards, then downwards-upwards scampering of the four violins, but ending with an extension of the opening syncopation (and on a triad, not an octave)? Is it the follow-up downwards pizzicato of the cellos, answered by the higher violas' closed position plucked dominant triad double stops, further answered by violins 3 & 4 on a wide open, plucked dominant quadruple (actually octuple) stop? Is it the mysterious and suddenly arhythmical 1st viola and 1st cello upward chromatic slither? Is it the deceptive cadence not on the expected second degree of the scale (i.e. dominant of the dominant), but on the enharmonic raised tonic (i.e. leading tone of the dominant of the dominant) resulting in a totally unprepared and unexpected harmonic shift? Is it the composite of these thirteen measures which is answered by a literally transposed repetition a half step higher than originally stated? Is the piece really in C major, or is it in D-flat major?

Even though the answers are effectively both “yes” and “no,” clues are buried in the textures and colors of these ideas as much as in the notes defining them (denuded of their instrumental clothing). Raff will build his movement as much out the aforementioned instrumental colors as he will out of more conventional “resultant themes.” The primacy of instrumental color as a constructive principle is one of the most salient aspects of Raff’s “method.”

Compared to the densely overscored Mendelssohn Octet, Raff’s, by comparison, is well centered, balanced, kaleidoscopic, and completely unexpected. You simply don’t know what’s coming next. The Mendelssohn has already overstayed its welcome, acoustically, by the fifth measure even though it is, perhaps, easier to play than Raff’s! Mendelssohn’s method is to establish textures and then keep them going ad infinitum. It is also “easier” to listen to, intellectually at least, for all of its demonstrable textural infelicities precisely because it makes no demands on the listener other than to drown in its unrelieved textures and to pick out the tunes in the midst of their unrelieved accompaniments. In Raff, by complete contrast, there is the Haiku-pointillistic klangfarbenmelodie paradox of having much more to listen FOR, without having nearly as much to listen TO.

The coy opening eventually gives way to a full tutti during which all of the previous hints and suggestions congeal, alle zusammen, into a dynamic and forward moving statement. This is music of continuous recombination – a device commonly encountered in Raff, where ideas turn in on themselves and, in their wake, generate extensions by permutation. But Raff also utilizes a very telling detail of instrumentation that stamps every measure of the piece with the mark of superlative craftsmanship. Textures are as often as not reduced to four or five parts distributed throughout the ensemble. Raff was thus careful to allow plenty of vertical breathing space (as much as he may also have been pre-planning the page turns in the parts he would typically copy out himself as he went forward with the composition itself).

For the rest of the opening of the movement, Raff goes about by extension and permutation developing his materials even though it is still, technically, the exposition! Aside from these statements in the “tonic” there is the expected secondary material “as it should be” in the “dominant” – but all of it is really derived from previously heard thematic fragments as its surface manner serves to satisfy “convention.” By the arrival of the first-ending (or measure 117), we have landed in a harmonic conundrum – the D dominant seventh chord would seem to be cadencing to the expected dominant G major, both for the purposes of concluding the exposition “as it should,” as well as to prepare the expected repetition the exposition. These D dominants, however, are intercepted by a swath of subito pianissimo Beethovenian F-sharp diminished sevenths in the third inversion – leaving the seventh, E-flat, as the lowest sounding tone. By means of common tone direct modulation, this becomes E-flat major, which is where the repeat of the exposition begins – not C major, which is where you would ordinarily expect it occur in a piece whose home tonality is, after all, C. But, as always, this is Raff, and things almost always never happen the way their deceptively conventional surface details might suggest. In fact, this deceptively transposed repetition of the “pre-exposition” is identical to the original opening save for two slight tonal adjustments. When new E-flat major tonality reaches the slithering suffix, everything shifts up a whole step to F-major, not a half step as at first. When repeated, as at first (and now cadencing in “dominant” C), the parallel suffix does not shift its position, but moves to D, at which point the repeat takes us directly and seamlessly to the 27th measure, whence the original exposition “formally” began.

The remainder of the movement plays with both the implicit and the explicit elements of the opening in alternating episodes of imitative writing, quasi concertato ensemble (which would be expected as part and parcel of the larger chamber music mechanism), frantic, scurrying passage work, imitative and contrary motion counterpoint, energetic but concise *tutti*s, and lyrical interludes. All of it leads inexorably to the recapitulation which, overlays continued development on top of restatement! Indeed, from measure 313 to the end of the movement, the 117 measure long coda (equally the length of any of the preceding sections) is as much a secondary development as anything else. This is facilitated considerably by Raff's small, cellular motives which result in blurring the line between statement and development. Raff clearly delights in the seemingly endless shell game of motivic permutation. In the end, though, the well earned and fully orchestral coda ends the movement with all questions of tonality firmly resolved in favor of C major.

The second movement, *Allegro molto*, is a brief, energetic, but subdued and fleet scherzo cast in binary form with a "surprise" in the final measures. After the extravagantly orchestral first movement, the scherzo's *sotto voce* energy makes for a very satisfying contrast. Formally, the piece consists of a telescoped scherzo followed by an equally telescoped A-flat major trio. The scherzo plays with alternating pyramiding textures: each of the eight voices enters in turn adding to the totality – either moving downwards from the first violin, or upwards from the second cello. Had this movement been part of a symphony, given its opening misterioso rapid "busyness," it is likely the music would have morphed into one of Raff's trademark hobgoblin scherzos. However, its extreme brevity casts it a kind of "baby goblin-in-training" which quickly gives way to a much more lyrical alternate episode. The trio initially does away with all the compound double rhythmic sub-division, and assumes a virtual second species contrapuntal texture with the first violin in the "melodic lead." Gradually, the violin's rhythm begins to accrete triplets, and the rest of the ensemble is quickly caught up in an accompanying rapid waltz-like vamping. Once the triplet rhythm has asserted itself long enough to counterbalance the initial non-triplet consequent phrase, the tonality shifts back to C-minor for a slightly extended restatement of the opening scherzo in which the pyramiding episode has been lengthened. In its turn, the now somewhat truncated trio restatement shifts not to A-flat major, but to the parallel C-major. Here, however, the scherzo's insistent rhythm is overlaid above (in the four violins) while the violas and the cellos maintain that part of the trio which is brought back. Upon arrival at what should be the final C-major cadence, we are given an appropriately telescoped coda in which the two thematic elements are directly combined, deceptively, as it turns out, in the major mode. In the last six measures, however, the tonality darkens quite suddenly, and ends, rather Sibeliusly, in C-minor.

The third movement, *Andante moderato*, is cast in a hybrid tripartite structure one frequently encounters in Raff. It is neither a simple ternary form, nor monothematic sonata form, nor rondo variant. The opening F-major component is comprised of three sections, but the middle part does not contain new material as much as it engages in a developmental extension and transformation of the opening. This process of thematic autogenesis, discussed previously in relation to the materials of the first movement, is of the same technical persuasion. The middle F-minor section operates in a similar manner even as it takes the opening 16 bar cantilena more as a point of departure only to transform it into something different but closely related to it. Gradually working its way to C-minor, then to A-flat major where the original cantilena is more clearly displayed the music lands back in F-major whose arrival constitutes the emotional high point of the entire work. The reappearance of the cantilena is not so much a restatement of the

opening as it is a fuller realization of it.

Where the movement opens with a variety of quintet combinations, the cantilena's return presents the same material in eight parts. Where the opening's five part writing is intimate and restrained, the return is bold and fully scored even as it is essentially reduced to four parts but with octave couplings, and "new" contrapuntal embellishment. The consistent movement-wide references to the cantilena might be mistaken for a rondo, but they are closer to "Glinka variations," so named for the Russian composer Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857) who devised the procedure (especially in his operas "A Life for the Tsar" (1836) and "Ruslan and Lyudmila" (1842)). The principle involves the use of a recurrent theme which remains essentially unchanged while the variations occur in the accompaniment which changes constantly. Think of it as effectively the inverse of a passacaglia. While Raff's awareness of Glinka is perhaps unknown, his manner of elaborative accompanimental variation, as executed in this movement, is a close relative of Glinka's, and a matter of circumstantial fact. Keep in mind, though, that the original theme is often "distracted" by extensions and developments, and this tends to make the variant forms of accompaniment all the more pronounced when the cantilena returns.

On another level, the andante itself is a close stylistic relative of the salon pieces (for example the world famous "Cavatina" of the Opus 85 "Six Morceaux") for which Raff was well known. Everything in it is handled with tasteful discretion, and without a drop of maudlin sentimentality. While there is a fairly even distribution of "thematic responsibility" between all the members of the octet, the first violin tends to carry more weight (an example of "tipping one's hat" to accepted conventionality). Raff's absolutely straight-faced approach is very personal and warm especially considering its placement between the scherzo and the finale. The initially subdued, tender lyricism (even when shifting to the "traditionally dramatic" F-minor) remains fairly constant throughout. Once all the minor digressions and tensions have been dismissed, the movement ends quietly and peacefully.

Raff, ever the master of the purposeful reversal, balances the homogeneity of the first three movements with a Vivace finale that throws caution to the wind leaping out in a number of different directions - a whirlwind tour-de-force of undisguised virtuosity. In the course of its 389 measures, the movement shifts between an affectionate parody of featherweight Mendelssohnian semiquaver "sawing," a faux double violin concerto, a swaggering unison "student song," and a purposefully stern episode of A-minor "à la Hongroise." The kaleidoscopic manner is dazzling, and uses virtually every trick of ensemble playing.

Like the first movement, the finale opens with yet another example of implicit exposition by accretion. Beginning with a contrast of relative tempi (MM=144) a septet of strings presents an initial motive consisting, rhythmically, of a whole note, a dotted half, and a quarter landing on another whole, or motive "A." The first violin answers with scampering eighth note figuration, motive "B." Altogether, we have three ideas here, the two separate relative tempi, the contrasting movement in the violin, and the composite of the two. In its way, it resembles the opening of a concerto movement in D minor (not C major, which will be established later). Some commentators have mistakenly confused this opening as evidence of Raff's slavish adherence to Mendelssohn, since it reminds them, possibly, of the final movement of the E-minor Violin Concerto. If we looked no further than the first twelve measures, charitably, that would be the lazy way of dismissing the remaining 377 measures of the movement! However, after two subsequent repetitions of this idea, we are given a diminution of the sluggish motive -

and in canonic imitation that is reminiscent of the pyramiding effects of the scherzo – motive “C.” No sooner has one transformation occurred, than a second diminution is given, motive “D”, thus effectively ramping up the tempo by a factor of eight without actually having changing it. As the septet appears to accelerate by diminution, the “soloist’s” eighth note sputtering (motive “E”) becomes momentarily fragmented, although within a few measures (as if to overcome any momentary indecision) it leaves the group behind taking off in a blaze of figuration. By the thirtieth measure (or rehearsal figure “A”), the movement proper is under way. But what has really happened here is more than a simple accumulation of momentum by diminution. Raff has actually presented all the materials of the movement while appearing merely to have engaged in a kind of throat clearing before the speech. And not only that, but the deceptive D-minor opening has given way to C-major.

The main body of the movement outlines a very straightforward rondo. The first section (measures 30-59) is built primarily out of the scampering violin motive accompanied by the constant chatter of quintets of accompaniment, all of it very hushed but with an occasional half-measure crescendo landing on quickly spat out sforzato. Added to this are phrases that sound four-square but which are often thrown off by unexpected measure long extensions – the effect being fundamentally Haydnesque. As is almost always the case, the material, based on some of opening motives, is subjected to development by extension. Towards its end, picking up weight and volume, it heads for a cadential point ... in the tonic key. Raff often likes to lead you on thinking that he will modulate to some related key only to wind up right back where he started, harmonically.

A unison string sextet announces the second period of the rondo, forte, in C major using the first telescoped motive (“C”), or a half and two quarters, as its head. The rest of this new tune is cast in rigid quarters with a triplet curlicue at the end of its first phrase. The effect is one of temporal augmentation and, all together, has the flavor of a good natured student song or, perhaps, a Bartokian transformation of a folk song. Regardless, the sudden absence of scampering eighths and accompanying harmonization stands out in sharp relief. As if to contrast the swaggering unison song, the two violins absent from the proceedings answer the sextet with a repetition of the tune overlaid on a bed of scampering eighths. The tutti-soli alternation is repeated, and then followed with an extended development of the two motives (rehearsal figure “C”). Buried in the tune is a rhythmic figure (dotted quarter, eighth, half – call it motive “F”), itself a diminution of part of the opening sluggish motive “A,” which comes to the fore. This fragment will assume much greater importance later on. As the second rondo episode winds down, and in the neighborhood of F major, the new motive “F” is itself cast in augmentation thus effectively halving the tempo.

By rehearsal figure “D” (measure 118), the first rondo episode has dutifully returned. Although retaining the initial kaleidoscopic array of quintets, the rondo does not turn in on itself harmonically as it did originally when heading for the first alternate episode. The restated original section is extended somewhat for the purpose of bridging to the second alternate episode and to change keys. In crossing this bridge, however, our new “F” motive becomes the rhythmic focus.

Beginning at measure 169, and now in A-minor, we are given an episode of mock drama without any emotive overdrive, just a stern exterior resembling other, similar Hungarian episodes one occasionally encounters in this composer – for example, in the final movement of Second Orchestral Suite (“In Ungarisheweise”). Like the previous alternate episode, the four-square layout of the theme and accompaniment suggests

more than a bit of paradistic fun rather than serious rhetoric. Towards its end, the episode swings around to C-major, setting up what might be expected as the next logical statement of the rondo's principal materials.

Although beginning as the expected rondo restatement, the music becomes involved with an aggregate development not only of the original materials, but also of the two other alternate episodes as well. At key points, it appears to be starting over again, but inevitably trails off in another direction following a different motivic fragment.

The final 100 measures of the piece, the longest single section of the movement, are involved with tying up all the loose ends – of the other movements of the Octet as well as the present movement. It begins by bringing back the upward chromatic slithering motive of the first movement, then continues with references to previously heard materials and procedures which are given a final hearing. The little used pizzicato is heard again for the first time since the first movement, as is the pyramiding of the scherzo, the antiphonal imitation of the first movement along with its triple-stopped accentuation. The Octet ends with a brief but virtuoso unison *melée* whose alternation of eight-part triple-stopped C major chords and unison Cs are the exact reverse of the end of the first movement even as its very last sounding C major agglomeration is exactly the same.

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