

Program Notes for “The Late Romantics,” 10/6/11

Joachim Raff was a self-taught musician who became world renowned—ranked as one of the foremost composers of his day by colleagues, critics and audiences alike, with acknowledged masterworks in most important musical genre. He overcame a disadvantageous youth to achieve a reputation equal to those of Brahms and Wagner. He was one of the most performed composers among his contemporaries.

He had a close association with Liszt and orchestrated many of his works for him. An esteemed teacher and musical administrator, Raff was director of a prestigious conservatory and, by his teaching and his musical innovations influenced composers as diverse as Mahler, Richard Strauss and Tchaikovsky. Yet, from the moment of his death in 1882, his reputation slid into precipitous decline; within thirty years his music was very rarely performed.

Why? Raff simply wrote too much music: 216 works with opus numbers, another 74 works without, and 48 arrangements of his own music. He was insufficiently self-critical. His works are of uneven quality.

It is obvious to us now that Raff did not deserve all the acclaim he enjoyed in his lifetime. Nor does he deserve the oblivion to which he has been consigned for most of the 20th century. He was not a genius to rank alongside Brahms and Wagner, but he was certainly gifted and, his achievement was considerable. Included in his vast output are works of rare quality, great technical skill, daring originality, and rapt beauty. To ignore Raff’s better works is to deny ourselves much that is moving and beautiful, stirring and colorful.

The Sextet for Strings of 1872 was a piece that Alan Krueck, a noted 19th century musicologist and Raff authority, suggested I arrange to include double bass. Dr. Krueck died this past year and this performance of the Theme and Variations from that work is dedicated to him.

Dr. Krueck was also an authority on Felix Draeseke, and was Director of the International Draeseke Society North America. We first met when he came to Kean to hear an all-Draeseke concert given by the Concert Artists—the first such event in the U.S. He wrote a glorious review of that concert and was so impressed with the Concert Artists that he willed his library to Kean. (The review can be found at http://www.draeseke.org/news/keanuniv_rev.htm.)

Dubbed a “giant” by Franz Liszt, **Felix Draeseke** was one of the leading composers of the “New-German School.” From the late 19th to early in the 20th Century, the music of this composer was performed and held in high regard. Brahms considered him a rival, but like Raff, we seldom hear of him anymore. Changes in fashion and political climates allowed his name and music to slip into obscurity, but as the 20th Century ended, recordings spurred a renewed interest in his music.

Draeseke’s Sonata in B-flat Major for Clarinet and Piano, op. 38, was written at a highpoint of the composer’s career. In 1887 clarinetists did not have a large repertoire of works by major composers in the genre of duo-sonata. The sonatas of Brahms, Reger and Saint-Saens were well in the future, so it is not without justification to claim Draeseke’s effort as the first major clarinet sonata of the 19th century. (Earlier works by Weber, Spohr, and Gade are more collections of genre pieces, potpourris, or themes and

variations.) Draeseke dedicated the Clarinet Sonata to his colleague at the Dresden Conservatory, Friedrich Demnitz. The work sounds deceptively easy and uncomplicated, but it has quite a few virtuosic demands and is a classic of compositional sophistication.

Johannes Brahms requires no introduction. Brahms composed his two Sextets for Strings, (opp. 18 and 36) for the standard ensemble comprised of a pair each of violins, violas and celli. The Concert Artists performed the first of his two Sextets for Strings (in B-flat Major), in my arrangement that includes double bass, on the first concert that we give in Enlow Hall in 2009. This evening we perform the Sextet in G Major, again in my arrangement.

All of my arrangements of chamber music in this vein—including the Brahms and Raff Sextets—are published by Editions Silvertrust of Riverwoods, Illinois, which features them in their catalogue of chamber music with double bass (<http://www.editionsilvertrust.com/chamber-music-with-bass.htm>).

Both sextets by Brahms radiate a warmth and sonic glow that show off the magnificent acoustical properties of Kean's new chamber music recital hall. The Sextet op. 36, subtitled *Agathe*, uses rhythmic and melodic ideas that evoke the name of Brahms' beloved, Agathe von Siebold (from whom he fled when marriage seemed expected and immanent). His use of a compositional technique called *soggetto cavato dal nome*, producing the notes A-G-A-H-E (German notation for A-G-A-B-E), makes an obvious point. Referring to this sextet Brahms said, "I have emancipated myself from my last love." It is interesting to note that work on the piece started some four years before his involvement with Agathe and was completed five years after their breakup.

The first movement, which opens in a hushed mysterious mood, contains a rhythmic motif (long-short-long) that is part of the opening theme and suggests the syllabic stress of Agathe's name spoken. The Agathe motto (A-G-A-B-E) is stated clearly in the close of the exposition. The rhythmic motif is also found here and there in the second movement scherzo, and other ways to evoke the name rhythmically are found in the lively stomping Landler-like Trio (or middle section). The third movement of the sextet was described by Edward Hanslick, the Viennese critic, friend, and supporter of Brahms, as "variations with no theme." But typical of Brahms and his complex compositional processes, the slow movement's theme resembles the opening theme of the first movement. The final movement alternates lively and relaxed episodes, fugal passages and long-lined melodies. One of the glories of 19th century chamber music, the G Major Sextet was published in 1865 and dedicated to Princess Anna of Hesse.

Notes by Anthony Scelba