

# JOACHIM RAFF

## FANTASIE-SONATE for Piano op.168

### *More a Fantasy or More a Sonata?*

*Historical and Analytical Considerations Concerning Joachim Raff's Op. 168.*

The first edition of Joachim Raff's second published sonata for piano (following Op.14) appeared in April 1872 with the title *Fantasie-Sonate für das Pianoforte* in the Leipzig firm of C.F.W. Siegel. Another work therefore which juxtaposes the liberal with the strict in its title? Which constituent may be considered holding the upper hand: relaxed handling of sonata form or perhaps measured, formally grounded discursiveness? One finds no answer in piano literature; no records or CDs are at hand, and for decades the printed edition could only be perused in a few libraries, in short: a practically forgotten piano work is once again made accessible. If a publisher takes upon himself the task of preparing and presenting a new edition, there must be something more behind it than mere documentary intent. Regard for the composition itself as well for historical questions concerning the circumstances of its origins, such as the situation with the genre piano sonata around 1870, leads no further than the conclusion that one has sought out an interesting composition, if not one which can be termed genial. The following observations are based on considerations from both directions.

#### I.

When Joachim Raff conceived his D minor sonata, Op. 168 during the first weeks of autumn in 1871, the political waves in Europe had surged well beyond the breakers. In 1866 Raff himself had had to witness how victorious Prussian troops had ended the war with Austria and defeated the troops of Nassau which had been allied with Austria during the conflict. Raff witnessed the defeated soldiers laying down their weapons in the plaza before Wiesbaden's city hall. The city had become Prussian.

The old rivalry between Prussia (under Bismarck's guidance) and France (with Emperor Napoleon III) sharpened in the succeeding years, aggravated in particular by the dispute over the question of succession to the Spanish throne. War broke out in July of 1870. Prussian strategy proved superior to that of the French and at the beginning of 1871 the Prussians were in Paris. The victory came at a time when an ever increasing tendency to eliminate the mentality of small town business had gained sway favoring a united and imperial Germany under the leadership of a Kaiser. When King Wilhelm I of Prussia became Emperor of Germany on January 18, 1871 - in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, of all places - the first apparent step toward unification had been taken. The *Gruenderzeit* had begun.

Joachim and Doris Raff had followed the war with understandable patriotic feelings, although neither possessed anything like enthusiastic endorsement of the military or the system of hierarchy associated with it. Whoever assumes that Raff, having composed his symphony *An das Vaterland* a decade previously, provided with programmatic explications which seem unintentionally amusing today, suddenly joined in the exuberant jubilation of the years following 1870, is completely mistaken. Raff's daughter Helene described his

reaction to domestic political conditions in the newly founded Reich as follows: "There was many a thing, unfortunately, which disappointed him in the new Germany. The old breed of German idealist which still stuck in him, felt repelled by the dissolute posturing of the *Gruenderzeit* and by the noisy nationalist enthusiasm of those who suddenly found it fashionable to be patriots - because Germany had become rich and strong. He had imagined a united Germany somewhat differently, more genteel and less ostentatious. The monuments which it brought forth, the celebrations which it instituted, offended his cultural instincts [...]. He complained how damaging it was for the German national character to toss slogans about, how dangerous the hollow pathetic gestures were, especially for art."

As before, Raff didn't share prevailing sentiment and gave notice in his own way through his compositions. As demonstration of this he dedicated his D minor sonata to the Frenchman Camille Saint-Saëns and the dedicatory lines for his latest symphony (No. 4, G minor, composed during the spring and summer of 1871) were not directed to Bismarck but were left out altogether: of all the symphonies this is also the least demanding in its orchestral requirements and definitely not a piece of wilhelminian pomp. The piano pieces, Opp. 164 to 166 carry French titles such as *Sicilienne pour le Piano* (op. 164, No. 1) or *Valse champêtre pour le Piano* (Op.166, No. 2). In his own way Raff took up a quasi-militaristic subject in 1872: his *Lenore* Symphony takes on Gottfried August Buerger's material and interprets it in sublimated form as a tale of two lovers separated by war, showing the deadly results of war and its phony glory. In contrast to such external preoccupations, the late sixties and early seventies represented a musically important phase for Raff, and one which also brought critical acclaim. With his *Im Walde* Symphony Raff was brought before the footlights of the music industry and remained there for a decade. His compositions were performed everywhere and usually discussed in detail. His symphonies 3 through 5, the piano pieces Op. 157 (with its famous second movement, *La Fileuse*), Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. 161, the piano suites Opp. 162 and 163, and the Octet, Op. 176 all gained enormous success both at home and abroad. By contrast the Sonata, Op. 168 solicited barely any attention. Neither the *Neue Zeitschrift fuer Musik* nor the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitschrift* printed discussions of it and its existence was noted for but a short while, mainly in the publisher's advertisement. One could consider this somewhat peculiar because a sonata generally attracted more attention than collections of little piano pieces or songs. At the time of the work's composition that attitude had, however, long ceased.

## II.

It was taken for granted well into the 19th century that all composition satisfied defined norms of genre and a composer's questioning of these norms arose from the necessity of considering a specific problem and not from a desire to be revolutionary; something similar is often encountered in expanding instrumental techniques. From the tension between formal rules and individual concepts new constellations were constantly evolving - inasmuch as no formal scheme was evident - and with them, a displacement in the correlation between discipline and freedom.

During the course of the last century the lines defining individual formal types were increasingly blurred. Wagner regarded his music dramas as the heirs to Beethoven's symphonies and Liszt countered with his concept of the symphonic poem, prototypes of song flowed into the symphony (as with Mendelssohn and Gade) and there were ever increasing parallels among individual forms; in the second half of the 19th century the Neudeutschen even thought themselves able to disregard sonata, instrumental concerto,

symphony and string quartet. Admittedly that didn't hinder either Hans von Bülow or Franz Liszt from praising individual works which strayed into the currents of the Mendelssohn-Schumann school, as long they did not reside there long. The piano sonatas of Rudolf Violes (especially his Op.1), Felix Draeseke and Julius Reubke all come from (temporary) supporters of the "progressive" party.

But for all that, problems concerning the piano sonata are not so easily compartmentalized. In contemporary concert attitudes of the period 1830-90, piano sonatas maintain a rather subordinate position if compared to characteristic pieces. The assembly of frequently played piano sonatas is limited basically to Chopin (opp. 35 and 58), Schumann (most of all, Op.11), Liszt (B minor) and Brahms (Op.5); in the literature concerning them, clear reservation can be detected, especially regarding Chopin and Schumann. Mendelssohn's sonatas are seldom encountered works of his youth, Schumann's sonata-like *Fantasie*, Op. 17 is played more frequently than his piano sonatas, Brahms's fulminating Op. 1 and Op. 2 are nowhere as beloved as his intermezzi and ballads. Such contributions as Tchaikovsky's Op.37 and Op.posth.80 and Grieg's Op. 7 rank as either apprentice works or *pieces d'occasion*; sonatas by women composers have an even more difficult situation. It is only with the sonatas of Alexander Scriabin that the genre gets new impetus but is worth noting that Scriabin's music remained practically unnoticed in Germany prior to 1970 and has only recently found its way into standard repertoire here.

That not to the contrary, publishers' advertisements, as well as critiques and concert reviews, give evidence of a not to be dismissed quantity of piano sonatas having been written, the number of which can be estimated only with considerable difficulty today, for most female and male composers made some attempt with such "classical" form at one time or another, and not necessarily just in their youth. Admixtures were often chosen which point at the direction of the aforementioned overlappings of form: the too little known *Sonate melancholique* of Moscheles, Schubert's *Wandererfantasie*, Liszt's Dante Sonata, Carl Reinecke's *Fantasie in Form einer Sonate*, Op. 15 or even Raff's Fantasy-Sonata, Op. 168. It is not difficult to discern Beethoven as the progenitor of such amalgamation of free form fantasy and strict sonata form in his Op. 27 sonatas - despite precursors in the 18th century - since they are called *quasi una fantasia*. The idea of bringing together the grand dimensional thought of sonata form with the rhapsodic, quasi-improvisatory and moment-embracing impulse of the fantasy was apparently a challenge for many musicians. One finds such synthesis in masterful permutation in Schubert's *Wandererfantasie*; Schumann (Op.17) and Liszt followed, the first of them emphasizing the element of fantasy and Liszt harnessing virtuosity to realize a single movement form from the broad dimensions of the multiple movement sonata.

The two versions of Raff's Sonata, Op. 14 - actually two basically different works - are already available as new editions from Edition Nordstern. To them is now accounted a composition of lesser dimension and one which is indebted to a different formal concept. But which? And to just what extent is the title here, *Fantasie-Sonate*, justified?

### III.

Like most other compositions of Raff, his fantasy-sonata warrants a variety of viewpoints in approaching it in a stylistically critical manner. The peculiar synthesis of characteristics relevant to movemental technique, melodic formula, rhythmic outline and specifically pianistic considerations and recalling specific composers in each instance, is once again apparent here. Without any problem for example, one can see the main theme (m. 33 ff.) as an imitation of a Mendelssohn theme because of its integration of leading tones in the

rolling motion of chord distribution; likewise the first variation of the Largo theme (m. 202, including the transitional measure 201) and the figuration from measure 253 onward refer to the Arietta in Beethoven's last piano sonata, while the virtuoso episode in the Allegro molto can be perceived against a background of similarly constructed Chopin models (as perhaps in his Ballad No. 1 in G minor, Op.23.). Everything considered, such analyses seeking inquiry into levels of particular derivation rarely produce questions illuminating the form of the individual work under discussion; be that as it may, the inclination of the composer toward integrating established "pattern particles", which may also be detected, could find further confirmation this way. In other respects it is worth taking into consideration that factual coordination of certain stylistic characteristics relative to specific composers is more difficult than providing valid evidence for individual parallels. Arnold Schoenberg has already expressed skepticism regarding the applicability of categorical "style". Today it seems less convincing than ever to turn a succinct manner of expression into something general. And if the attempt to consider say, Mendelssohn's or Brahms's music in a stylistically critical manner is already floundering, a real blunder is waiting when it comes to Raff. On one hand there are always definite influences which one encounters in Raff's scores over and over again - foremost among them "middle period" Beethoven and Mendelssohn; and then there is his predication of "incorporating" changes during the course of composition, again within individual works. This last consideration more or less has its basis in Raff's strong respect for traditional forms. Neither an opportunist nor a reformer, he constantly sought security in a fluctuation between tradition and individual approach, which in his more successful compositions led to thrilling configurations.

Raff's immense output for piano has been disregarded too long and for this reason it is difficult to find an appropriate position for the D minor sonata in it. In lieu of this, isolated remarks concerning the circumstance and idea of a work must here suffice for considerations.

#### IV.

In the lovely concluding chapter of her biography *Joachim Raff, Ein Lebensbild* (Joachim Raff, a Portrait of His Life) Helene Raff summarized Raff's personal characteristics and preferences: despite her understandable partisanship, there is nowhere in her book a tendency to make her father a hero. In his hierarchy of art, she informs us, Raff placed architecture immediately after music and before literature and painting (p. 258). This allusion is best understood by the fact that Raff's compositions are less frequently seductive because of flaming ecstasy or novel sounds than because of their extrovert manner. One perceives in almost all instances some grandiose formal outline, the framework of which encompasses musical "support columns", formal divisions and important themes before any detailed work follows. It is apparent that Raff's personal self-control, by no means cautious in expression, also manifests itself in his compositions. The sonata Op. 168 is a significant example for such peculiarity.

The ambiguity of its formal design catches the eye immediately: is the work in a single movement (with several divisions, as in Mozart's C minor fantasy, KV 475) or really in three movements. Mendelssohn had already designed his instrumental concerti so that three movements could be played without pause, but they were abetted by transitional measures. As in Liszt's Sonata in B minor, which likewise presents "the multi-movemental in the single movemental" and thereby fuses the cyclical nature of sonata outline with sonata-allegro, both approaches become valid, though strictly speaking, two different measure counts would here be pre-supposed. In contrast to Liszt, Raff's slow part is not

handled as a subordinate movement but actually forms a middle section with variations. As analysis of the motivic linkage can show, the movements hang closely together with one another, especially the outer ones and yes, even the "third" movement proves to be a skillful characteristic variant of the "first" in performance practice. Because of these a continuous measure count has been chosen in the following observations.

Considered quite basically Raff's sonata consists of three parts which are set off from one another by the tempo indications; in this manner a slow part is surrounded by two faster ones. While the performance instructions of both final parts are directed solely to tempo, in the finale an increase in tempo from *Allegro molto* to *Presto* is required and Raff adds a further defining characteristic to the *Allegro* indication of the beginning part and giving it additional weight: *patetico*, an expression associated with piano music from the first half of the 19th century - Kalkbrenner, Moscheles and Liszt among others. The first page of the score therefore accounts for this indication as well as for the compound title of the work, *Fantasie-Sonate*. The entrance of the main theme is preceded by an introductory modulatory passage free of any tempo indication, where dynamic contrasts, pauses, quick change in note values and lack of concluding cadences emphasize the rhapsodic character of fantasy as in the slow introduction to the *Allegro* section. The addition "*a capriccio*" in smaller print allows the interpreter place for free presentation of this beginning and because of this, the composer refrains from further indications involving agogics. Raff's typical "quadratic" manner of writing, which usually avoids triplets in thematic construction, is applied here also, which is why the seamless doublings of note values (e.g. from m. 20 to m.21) should be nuanced during execution so that the entire opening doesn't appear too stiff.

The harmonic progressions of the first 26 measures avoids the third almost completely in the later tonic chord, d'-f'-a'; in the sequential progress of measure 22, f' is embraced as a suspension. The concluding expansion aims at an harmonic colon regardless of the entrance announced by the a tempo indication at the beginning of the main part of the movement and that is exactly where the f' in the bass occurs which we have been anticipating. The main key of D minor is reached, confirmed and established for the main theme in swift maneuver.

The theme itself unites the tempo of a rolling figure in 16ths with the motive built from repeated quarter and half notes (and which produces the effect of a different, longer melody) followed by a succession of ascending (or "questioning") notes, though in the course of the sequential writing descending notes are also encountered. In its basic version the motive possesses something emphatic; in its constant alignment of elements it nevertheless avoids monotony, since there is reversal of motion every few steps, and this is exceptionally effective. This theme in a minor key, as is so often the case with Raff, is provided with neither a tragic, irresolute tone nor with one of sadness and longing. It seems more a condition of transformation admitting many paths of departure. Along with the uniformity of the motivic series one takes into account the diatonic aspect of the harmony, which rarely strays from the tonic.

An eight measure episode featuring parallel 4ths and a continuum of 16th notes brings a repeat of the theme in measure 61, this time taking an admittedly different harmonic course (via C minor, D minor toward B flat major, the subdominant of the tonality of the subsidiary section, F major). The brief dynamic climax (m. 74 ff) continues the cluster of 16ths and leads to the subsidiary F major section (from m. 84 on) via a written out *ritardando*. A simple song scheme, with the melody in the right hand and chordal

accompaniment of somewhat static effect in the left, undergoes a certain compression, when the left hand is rendered independent. Nor does the melody in the right hand obey that simple sequential plan the way the first theme had outlined it initially. Raff spins his melodic threads cheerfully onward, taking care to provide stimulation by alternating voices and motivically connecting the subsidiary section to the main theme; its entrance through chord repetitions includes successive half notes from measure 95 onward (right hand, left hand in m. 97); the rhythmic sequence emanating from measure 11 therefore does not appear only at the beginning of the main theme but also in the expansion of the subsidiary section.

And, as in the major part of the movement, the main theme is taken up again after a short feint and is spun out with rich decoration in playful figuration of the right hand, before a single short line of transition (m. 111 ff) is introduced permitting further progress.

In a traditionally constructed sonata-allegro there would here follow a concluding group with a new or derivative secondary idea confirming the tonality of the subsidiary section and concluding the exposition. Raff indeed brings a further increase in tempo and dynamics and the motion soon seems to develop into a toccata requiring considerable dexterity and brilliance from the pianist. After this a traditional development section might ensue. Raff had certainly written traditionally conceived developments often enough before. This time he gives himself to the realm of Fantasie-thoughts as he blends spontaneity, development and reprise. Measures 120-122 turn toward F major, with B flat minor and D flat major as mediants. While the right hand brings forth ever more daring figuration, the left hand joins in at measure 124 "under the (right) hand" in the truest sense of the phrase and again with the rhythmic nucleus of the main theme, isolating it next without supplying the descending variant from measure 42, so that one could elect to say that Raff has utilized the traditional method of splitting a motive and using it in the developmental process. The "turning point", should one consider mentioning it, comes with measures 134-137. The split is now tapered, except that only the three quarter notes are directed through the tonal space, while the 16th note accompaniment pulsates relentlessly without crossing the right hand, as was the case in the "exposition". By measure 138 we already have the "reprise" which, in its *agitato* version with its doubled tempo, behaves like one of those extended "coda" sections which Raff so often supplied in his symphonies (e.g. in the first movement of the Fourth Symphony just previously completed).

In other words, Raff utilizes measures 134-137 as redirection in the dominant back to a "reprise" for which there is no preceding development which can be taken seriously. The material of the sonata-allegro is so economical that Raff can simply use it to fuel the sonata over and over again and ever onward. The course of the *Allegro patetico* leads one to expect a sonata-allegro once more, since there are rudimentary signals in evidence, but development in this direction is abruptly halted. The radical change from quarter to eighth notes does not leave one satisfied (m. 137 ff). At this point as well, the pianist is faced with consideration of relationships forcing him to be able to "start through" again with measure measure 139. The compression of the movement now calls for reference to the formal events of the "exposition", dispenses with a secondary theme however and retains the diminished version of the main theme with its succession of 8th notes. Once again the *patetico* of the movement's performance designation is called to mind and results in a type of "knocking" motive that has been used countless times since Beethoven. In the end only the quarter note four count remains and it is applied practically throughout the entire extent of the keyboard.

The tempo reduction and the succession of quarter notes and lengthened whole notes bring the beginning of the work back in play after a short period of modulation: if one examines it closely, it can be ascertained that first, the prolonged diminished chord before the double bar functions as a suspension to the B flat major chord of the *Largo* part and secondly, in the cantilena of the right hand with which the *Largo* begins the descending melodic direction of measure 2 is varied. The *Largo* itself consists of several easily identifiable variations on the theme appearing in the four-part section. As it progresses the melody dissolves more and more into figuration, but remains submerged in the proceedings.

In measures 249 ff Raff makes a further attempt at leading astray disparate particles of the sonata. In the middle of measure 249 an anticipatory major mode of the delayed *Allegro molto* appears in brilliant scherzo fashion after a broader final variation and a transition, which itself is motivically indebted in its harmonic dress to the *Allegro patetico*.

The *Allegro molto* then takes over the intervallic course of the main theme from the *Allegro patetico* but transforms its rhythmic outline through increased velocity and altered accentuation and in turn, the relationship of left and right hand to each other. Syncopation then serves naturally as an extracted detail for "gaining energy" and further their gradation. The climax is thereby reached more quickly. Even the contrast with the following episode, characterized by rippling figures, is likewise heightened which, like the subsidiary part of the *Allegro patetico*, begins in the parallel tonality of F major. The movement gradually gains in tempo and playful exuberance. A new phase begins with measure 356, where both hands imitate one another and the piano part undergoes a fullness of expansion. With a grand gesture of warring elements featuring double-octaves, the music reaches a climax in the major mode à la Liszt, which gloriously exhibits the thematic relationship of the three movements in 3/2 meter or, should one prefer, the relationship of the elements constituting a work divided into three sections (m. 404 ff): the first motive of the sonata, as mentioned, put in at the beginning of the *Largo* as well, resounds in the right hand, and with this begins a scintillating cascade of octaves in the left, at the beginning of which, syncopation and interval direction of the theme (d'-e'-f'/f#) come in, the theme, as mentioned, having dominated the two fast sections.

Raff's sonata does not end with this crowning broad gesture by any means, however. Combining 8th notes and triplet 8ths and heading again for D minor, he instead staggers the tempo in a *stretta* and creates a grand keyboard resonance for what is in every way an effective conclusion to the sonata.

## V.

Whether male or female, admirers of colorful and well written piano music once again now have available for them the Fantasy-Sonata in D minor, Op. 168 by Joachim Raff, a work which helps to fill many gaps. For those who are generally taken up with Raff, there is now opportunity to study an important piano composition otherwise difficult to obtain. On the other hand, those who would like to know what the situation is concerning the large number of forgotten piano sonatas from the middle and end of the 19th century, have now received a further implement for answering their questions - along with the two versions of the Sonata in E flat minor (Op. 14). For others who may be looking for piano music of the late Romantic period which has not been commercially exploited, they can now treat themselves to something of the best. The overlapping of fantasy and sonata elements especially guarantee the discovery of much that is arresting, for despite conventional

thematic material and the certainly unsparkling variations of the Largo, one's expectations are constantly arrested and pianistically gratifying problems are posed.

One might not go so far as to characterize Raff's Op. 168 as a work of genius comparable to Brahms's early sonatas or Liszt's B minor sonata. But along with similar compositions of Grieg, Tchaikovsky and the recently rediscovered sonatas of Felix Draeseke and Julius Reubke, it can hold its own, and its irresistible sweep towards the end, assuming it is appropriately played, cannot fail to have an effect. As was mentioned before there has not yet been a recording of the sonata and so it is up to the individual interested in this composition to seat him-or herself down and make an attempt at playing it.

Matthias Wiegandt, Freiburg, im September 1996  
translated by Alan H. Krueck, California University of Pennsylvania, December 1996

copyright © 2000 by Edition Nordstern, Stuttgart