

Introduction to Raff's Piano Suites

By Alan H. Krueck

This Introduction began the notes which Dr Krueck wrote for a series of four CDs issued by his AK Coburg label in 2003 and 2004 and was common to each booklet's notes. The CDs contained all seven of Raff's Piano Suites and his arrangement for piano of J.S. Bach's six Suites for solo Piano, all played by Alexander Zolotarev. Surprisingly, there are a couple of factual errors in Dr Krueck's summary of Raff's life and corrections are noted at the end.

Joseph Joachim Raff was born May 27, 1822, in Lachen, Switzerland (Canton Schwyz). His basic education came primarily through home schooling, since the family struggled to make ends meet. Nevertheless his organist father encouraged his son's evident and early manifestations of musical ability. Self-taught on piano and violin Raff continued his pursuit of music and remained basically auto-didactic until age 15* when he actually was able to gain some formal education, though by then he had expanded his interests to philosophy and mathematics as well, and had proven his remarkable linguistic facility. In those years preceding his 21st birthday Raff had also built something of a catalog of original compositions, primarily for piano. Some of these were sent to Felix Mendelssohn who encouraged Raff by recommending them for publication by the prestigious publishing house, Breitkopf und Härtel. Shortly thereafter Raff had the good fortune to be discovered by Franz Liszt and he was invited to accompany Liszt on a concert tour. This early Raff-Liszt relation was interrupted by Raff's (mistaken) sense of compositional and technical insecurity and he decided to study with Mendelssohn, an undertaking frustrated by Mendelssohn's death as Raff prepared to settle in Leipzig. Raff then accepted a post in Cologne,** writing for the music periodical *Caecilie*. 1849 proved fortuitous for Raff, for in that year Liszt invited him to be an assistant by him in Weimar and for the next five years Raff remained as amanuensis and consultant to Liszt. During that period Raff continued to produce prolifically, extending his range from small piano forms through to his first symphony (now lost) and first opera, *König Alfred*, (King Alfred). Due to his tenure by Liszt, Raff automatically gained recognition as a member of the New German School, and ultimate allegiance to Richard Wagner and Wagner's "Music of the Future." Raff, though admiring Wagner, kept a respectful aesthetic distance from this master, as well as from his mentor Liszt. In 1856 Raff married the actress Doris Genast*** and left Weimar to settle in Wiesbaden, where he would remain until 1877 when he was summoned to Frankfurt to accept the post of director of the newly opened Hoch Conservatory of Music. He died in Frankfurt, June 24, 1882, at the height of his career and at the height of his international recognition, celebrated and acclaimed by not only the general music public but by contemporaries such as Wagner, Liszt, Saint-Saens and Tchaikovsky.

When Raff married in 1856 and moved to Wiesbaden*** he had already achieved popularity with publication of innumerable short piano pieces, today referred to in a derogatory manner as "salon" pieces. With his prize winning First Symphony *An das Vaterland* (To the Fatherland), Raff entered a new phase of international recognition, that of the world's leading living symphonist, recognition which would not begin to wane until the appearance of Brahms' first two symphonies only a few years before Raff's demise. Thereafter Raff's popularity went into swift and inexplicable decline and by the 1920s he had all but disappeared from concert repertoire. While a lessening of popularity is understandable, the almost vituperative appraisals of his music in the early 20th century sicken one today with their demonstration of contempt for his remarkable technical gifts and malice towards his innate lyrical ability and gift for tone color. Fortunately the Raff revival which began with CD recordings of major works in the 1980s has demonstrated how callous and unjustified these attitudes were, and thousands around the world now eagerly embrace his works once again.

Raff's output was enormous and there is no denying that some pieces are stronger than others and that some major works containing movements of extraordinary power and

invention fail to convince totally because of adjunct sections of inferior expression. Raff left a great number of works in all the major forms of the time: sonata, string quartet, concerto and symphony. Among these forms is one that had been somewhat neglected in consideration, that of the instrumental suite. To be sure, all of the four suites for orchestra have been recorded, but until now, Raff's seven suites for solo piano and his arrangements of the six cello suites of Johann Sebastian Bach for piano have remained in the background.

The purely instrumental suite, either for solo instrument or orchestral contingent reached its apex of popularity in the early to mid 18th century. By the time of Georg Philipp Telemann's death in 1768 the suite as a favored instrumental form had literally ceased to exist, for consideration of it in the classical period is practically nil. Neither Haydn and Mozart, nor Beethoven and Schubert used the term. Instead more diversionary and contemporary designations invaded musical terminology, terms more reflective of contemporary taste than that of "suite". Divertimento, serenade, cassation: all may have had parallels with the older ideal of suite, but both musical style and nomenclature had changed. This state of affairs seems to have lasted until shortly after Beethoven's death, for in the 1830s, 40s and 50s, the purely instrumental suite begins to reappear, for example among the compositions of the Lachner brothers and even less well known contemporaries. With the appearance of the suites of Joachim Raff in the 1850s and 60s and 70s, one can speak of a revival of the form, one taken seriously by the ardent Raff admirers Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky and Edward MacDowell. With the onset of neo-classicism the wheel had come full turn and the term is commonplace among instrumental works of the 20th century.

It is well known that throughout his creative life Raff had a tremendous appreciation of Baroque forms, not only in consideration of content, but in consideration of expressive potential as well. Joachim Raff composed and published seven separate suites for piano, two for string quartet, four for orchestra and one each for violin and orchestra and piano and orchestra. In addition to these he also arranged for piano solo the six solo cello suites of Johann Sebastian Bach. All of Raff's orchestral suites have now appeared on CD (some even in duplication) and now Alexander Zolotarev has commenced his recording of all of Raff's piano suites, including the Bach arrangements, thereby filling an important gap in the Raff discography.

The series of Raff's original suites for piano begins in 1857 with the Suite (No.1) in A minor, Op.69. The Suite (No.2) in C major, Op.71 and the Suite (No.3) in E minor, Op.72 also date from 1857. The Suite (No.4) in D minor, Op.91 was composed in 1859, while the years 1870 and 1871 respectively brought Raff's Suite (No.5) in G minor, Op.162 and Suite (No.6) in G major, Op.163. The final Suite (No.7) in B flat major, Op.204 was finished in 1876, Raff's final full year in Wiesbaden. Raff's arrangements of Bach's suites for solo cello for piano date from 1865-1868. All of these works have been reprinted by Nordstern Verlag, Stuttgart, Germany, edited by Volker Tosta.

* *Sic.* Raff was educated at a grammar school in Germany from 12 until 15 years of age.

** *Sic.* Raff's time in Cologne was *before* Mendelssohn's death, after which he settled in Stuttgart.

*** *Sic.* Although Raff followed her to Wiesbaden in 1856, he did not marry Doris Genast until 1859.