

Suite No.5 in G minor for Piano Op.162

By Alan H. Krueck

This short description was written by Dr Krueck for one of a series of four CDs issued by his AK Coburg label in 2003 and 2004. 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.

1. Elegy in Sonata Form
2. Folksong with Variations
3. *Ländler*
4. *Mährchen*

Eleven years had passed since the composition of the fourth piano suite (Op.91) as Joachim Raff finished his Suite No. 5 in G minor, Op.162 at Wiesbaden in 1870. That period witnessed his emergence as perhaps the world's pre-eminent symphonist. His music was played everywhere and publishers were not hard to find. By the end of the 1870s he was regarded internationally on the same level as Wagner, Liszt, Brahms and Saint-Saens. It is perhaps Raff's pre-occupation with structures of larger scale in the 1860s and 70s that similar manifestations of the grandiose can be noticed in the composer's works for keyboard. Certainly expansive is one adjective applicable to the Suite No.5 in G minor, Op.162 from the standpoint of outline, for although it contains no more movements than the four in its predecessor Op.91, the development of materials is at once broader but equally focused. This suite, like its predecessor, was definitely not written with the casual piano player in mind. Indeed, Raff's friend, the pianist Ludwig Bußler, arranged the suite for piano four 4 hands and with Raffe's approval made an easier two hand version of the third movement *Ländler*. If the Suite No.5 in G minor, Op.162 never achieved quite the popularity nor regularity of performance as the Suite No.4 in D minor, Op.91, it was certainly not ignored and the second movement Variations on a Folksong went on to have an independent life of popularity unmatched by any other single movement in all the suites for solo piano.

The first movement of the G minor suite offers a most remarkable consideration of form, for Raff calls it an Elegy in Sonata Form. Though "elegy" does not denote any set musical form, it does convey an idea of music that is somewhat wistful and sad and also reasonably slow, but this elegy of Raff opens with a sonorous quasi-*glissando* run on the sub-dominant of G minor and after a held dominant chord (*p*) of G minor, devolves into a cascade of 16th note triplets as Raff brings in his main theme. At 96 quarters to the minute, the accepted spirit of elegiac is elusive, but the songful material and its harmonically rich accompaniment and further development do indeed impart a somewhat melancholy atmosphere. It is only after the exposition of the secondary, march-like material, and the addition of developmental motives, that one begins to take into consideration that the whole movement is in sonata form and as the movement unfolds the concept of elegy truly begins to manifest itself, though the coda of the movement, with its wide range of dynamics and modulations, is a startling though convincing conclusion with its fortissimo ending.

The second movement *Volkslied mit Variationen* (Folksong with Variations) became, as mentioned above, the single most popular movement of the Suite No.5 in G minor, Op.162 - and with good reason, though perhaps not always traceable to the music itself. In the latter half of the 19th century, perhaps due to the Romantic concept of the soul of a people found in its folk music and poetry, just about anything with the term "folk" in it was an immediate psychological signal for attention, and works based on folk tunes generally had tremendous success (e.g.: Liszt's Hungarian rhapsodies or Dvorak's Slavonic dances). What is interesting about Raffe's variations in this suite, is the fact that he doesn't place an ethnic adjective (e.g. Swiss or Swabian) before the term folksong. Since no one to date has

identified an already existing folk tune that Raff selected, one must assume that the composer's "folk tune" is more likely a "folk-like tune" of Raff's own design. The theme itself is presented in simple homophonic guise with progressions in thirds prominent. The first variation already calls for advanced piano technique and variation 2 is obviously in the domain of the virtuoso. Variation 3 is an elaborately contrapuntal affair, requiring great control of the inner voices, while the more playful Variation 4 relies on a triplet motion frequently encountered in Raff. The brief Variation 5 is quite demanding, but Variation 6 brings back the triplet motion of Variation 4. Variation 7 is harmonically the most arresting, since there is a good deal of delayed modulation before the variation settles on the tonality of the key signature: E flat major. After a pleasant interlude the variation then develops into one of the most demanding in the score, involving many a virtuoso touch. After a general pause variation 8, "*leggiero*", increases the call for virtuosity, after which, in Variation 9, a dance like rhythm takes over and allows the performer something like a bit of relaxation. The 10th and final variation is marked *andante* and calls for a delicacy of touch, since 16th and 32nd note patterns dominate. There is a three measure halt and a hint at the folk tune, before the rapid motion returns. The main theme is sounded twice in the left hand beneath the decorative material and the movement concludes *p*. The movement occupies more than a third of the performance time for the entire suite.

The third movement *Ländler* is marked *Allegretto*, E flat major, 3/4. Again the folk element is invoked by the title. Those expecting Brucknerian or Mahlerian stomping in this movement will be disappointed, but hopefully they will also be delighted by this gently flowing movement. Raff seems almost playful in the two contrasting ideas which supply most of the material, but the actual sections of contrast rely on reasonable virtuosity. Bold moves in the harmony - E-flat major to B major - highlight Raff's powers of invention.

Since practically no manuscripts in the composer's own hand exist for Raff's works, one is not sure whether the title for the final section of the suite is spelled correctly or not: anyone knowledgeable in German must look askance at the spelling of *Mährchen*, which is usually spelled without the "h". Perhaps Raff was simply indulging a conceit regarding the archaic, but despite the fact that Albert Schäfer's Raff catalog spells it in the normal way, the published score represents it as printed here. Again we have a term that would appeal to Romantic sensibilities - would that Raff had also supplied a program with this otherwise generic description! Putting aside these extra-musical considerations, this *finale* to Raff's Suite No.5 in G minor, Op. 162 for solo piano is something of a problem, considering the accomplishments experienced in the preceding movements. Ostensibly a modified rondo, a rondo theme is difficult to perceive on first hearing, since the music maintains an introductory quality for almost forty-two measures. Then, in the parallel major of the home key, there finally emerges a swaying, dotted-rhythm figure - related to the minor mode motion of the very opening of the movement. The necessary rondo episodes seem predicated more on exchanges in differing decoration than thematically distinct entries. Marked *Allegro vivo*, 4/4, the music is fleet, not particularly adventuresome in its harmony and totally dominated by writing (both hands) for the treble register - where the movement also ends decisively in the home key of G minor.