

Booklet notes by Avrohom Leichtling for DIVOX CDX 20506

Raff: Piano Quintet Op.107 & Phantasie Op.207b
Goetz: Piano Quintet

[The notes relating specifically to Goetz's Piano Quintet have been omitted]

Of the string and keyboard chamber ensembles favored by composers in the 19th Century, the piano quintet has always proven to be one of the most challenging. Its complement of four strings (2 violins, viola and cello or bass) and piano presents specific difficulties of balance and texture. Unlike the piano trio or even the piano quartet, the quintet presents the challenge of integrating two completely distinct but independent instrumental groups - a circumstance that on the evidence of its literature almost always mitigated against simplicity. Early string quartet writing characterized by dense polyphony, the highly elaborate nature of virtuoso keyboard composition in the period established an essential conundrum: "immovable object meets irresistible force" - the fundamental caveat of the piano quintet medium. Piano quintets, therefore, needed to be composed much like orchestral works through the discreet mixing of the many different combinations of the instruments of the ensemble. Joachim Raff's Quintet in A minor, Opus 107 (1862), is one of the consummate masterpieces of the quintet literature. His Fantasy in G minor, Op. 207b (1877), consists of but an extended single movement.

Joachim Raff (27 III 1822, Lachen (CH) - 25 VI 1882 Frankfurt a. M.) is today an emerging composer whom tradition has all too often viewed quite perversely as little more than a composer of program symphonies. He was in fact one of the most prominent and influential musicians of his time, an extremely important and innovative teacher and administrator, and the remarkably prescient anticipator of virtually all the technical developments of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He often endured the excoriation of his contemporaries for the apparent ease with which he produced one major work after another, as well as for his absolute rejection of any particular trend or fad in place of an all-inclusive eclectic aesthetic. We now know that he was at least a century ahead of his time. That he was a consummate master can also now be recognized without qualification. Raff's early professional years were spent as Franz Liszt's assistant at Weimar. Later, having broken from the "avant garde" Weimar circle, Raff settled in Wiesbaden, where he earned his living by a combination of teaching, performing and selling his own works to various publishers. Ultimately, he assumed the directorship of the newly created Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt. The paradox of his ubiquitous influence and presence on concert programs during the 1860s through the 1880s, followed by the total collapse of his reputation and subsequent disappearance from the concert hall, remains one of the most egregious examples of musical politics at its absolute worst.

Raff composed his **Piano Quintet in A minor**, Opus 107 in Wiesbaden in 1862, and considered it to be one of his major works. While working on it, he acknowledged that it was more difficult to write than a string quartet or a symphony. Dedicated to King William III of the Netherlands, the Quintet was first performed in Bremen on 22 March 1865, having been published by J. Schuberth (Leipzig) in November, 1864. In a letter to the composer in April 1869, Hans von Bülow exclaimed that he thought the Quintet "the most important piece of chamber music since Beethoven." The work appeared frequently

in concerts of the period, and was well received. The writing throughout is gracious to all of the instruments, and allows each the opportunity for virtuosic display as well as for solidly cooperative ensemble playing. Raff does not clot the acoustic space with unrelieved ensemble writing, but is careful to vary the instrumental coloration moment by moment. Raff was one of the earliest composers to make instrumental color a primary compositional element, even in the context of chamber music. Raff's "difficulty" clearly was a function of maximizing the coloristic element while at the same time minimizing the aural fatigue that occurs when textures and colors are more rather than less static. The approach is clearly an orchestral one, and Raff's mastery of the orchestra and of orchestral thinking is evident even when his forces are reduced to five instruments.

The Quintet's four movements contain, first to last, a wholly characteristic element in the sequence of its keys which together make a wonderful play against its otherwise more "conventional" architecture. Raff instinctively understood that listener "burnout" could result from static tonality as much as from unvarying instrumental texture. One frequently finds unrelated mediant harmonic relationships (that is, by thirds) between and within the movements of his compositions - a device exploited by Beethoven and Haydn. The rather stormy first movement, *Allegro mosso assai*, begins in typical Raffian fashion with the gradual emergence of thematic and motivic prototypes before the first explosion of fully stated ideas, and is set with stern determination in A minor; there is no A major resolution at its end. The second movement *Scherzo, Allegro vivace quasi presto*, however, provides the missing C-sharp that would have been part of the closing of the first movement had it ended in A major. In this case, the movement is cast in C-sharp minor, a totally unexpected key with which to follow A minor. The effect is to clear the aural palette, and it is exhilarating - like a blast of clear, cold air upon emerging from an over-heated, smoke-filled room. The third movement, *Andante quasi larghetto*, reverses the relationship of the first to the second movement. As with the first movement, the missing major third (E-sharp) becomes the new tonal center enharmonically (E-sharp=F): the mercurial scherzo is therefore followed by another major third leap upwards to F major. The finale, *Allegro brioso, patetico*, with its very sly references, *à la Hongroise*, to the Piano Concerto in C minor, Opus 37 of Beethoven, sees the process reversed once again by moving up a major third to the tonic key, A minor. Raff avoids the Convention of the "heroic" minor-to-major tonal transformation with a resolutely gritty ending in A minor.

The word "fantasia" occurs in no fewer than 27 of Raff's titles. Understanding the term as referring to organizational procedures outside the conventional, it is clear that Raff attached as great importance to exploring the unconventional in compositional architecture as he did to novel harmonic and instrumental devices. The **Fantasy in G minor**, Opus 207b began as a composition for two pianos. Written in Wiesbaden in 1877 and following closely on the heels of the 8th Symphony, Opus 205 (1876) and the 2nd Violin Concerto Opus 206 (1877), it is Raff's last chamber music composition. The work was dedicated to, and first performed in its original version, by Pauline and Max Erdmansdorfer on 29 September 1877 in Wiesbaden. When the two-piano version was published by C.F.W. Siegel (Leipzig) in June 1878, the score carried the comment... *bearbeitet vom Komponisten* (Opus 207b) [reworked by the composer], referring to the Quintet version. Arrangements and transcription of works being the most common method of acquainting the general public with new pieces, it might appear as though version "b" was little more than an afterthought. However, Raff, like Brahms in the transformation of his 2 Piano Sonata in F minor into the Piano Quintet, did much more than merely "arrange" it - the differences in medium alone would have dictated a near-

total reconception. Without Raff's manuscript, however, it is impossible to know the details of the transformation other than by direct comparison of the two versions. A major problem with Raff scholarship, however, is the near total absence of original manuscript sources. Once a piece was published, Raff destroyed ("lost track of") his original materials. Had a copy of the score of the original version of his 1st Violin Concerto, Opus 161 not found its way to the Sibley Library at the Eastman School of Music in 1930, we would not even know of its existence, other than as an attribute printed on the published score of the reworked version by August Wilhelmj. The original version of that work was published for the first time in 2007 by Edition Nordstern (Stuttgart).

The Fantasy presents an interesting reversal of the earlier Quintet. Whereas the A minor quintet is built in four separate movements, the Fantasy has but one. Similarly, as the earlier work featured an unusual design in its internal key relationships, the Fantasy sticks to more traditional ones. With Raff, however, one must never assume that what appears to be normal is, in fact, normal. A hallmark of his art is the manner in which he takes the familiar and turns it inside out. Raff treats the ensemble here quite differently than in the A minor Quintet. Considerably more emphasis on block writing for the ensemble is featured here, perhaps a remnant of the original two piano version. It is likely the declamatory nature of the original piece which requires more tutti than subtlety.

The Fantasy's 744 measures divide into three sections. The opening, in G minor, presents a characteristically four square "*patetico*" theme, *Allegro agitato*, in the strings with close knit arpeggios in the piano. A secondary lyrical theme (in D-flat major!) establishes the harmonic tension which pushes the argument forward throughout the piece. Immediately, Raff develops his materials but does not recapitulate them at any point in the piece. Shortly afterwards, the opening appears to come to an abrupt end, a deception, since it leads directly to the second section of the piece in E-flat major. The new *Larghetto*, in triple meter, is more extended than the G minor opening, and follows the same procedure - exposition of several thematic ideas followed by extensive development. The secondary materials of the second section hover around F-sharp major and A major, whose relationship to E-flat major closely resembles the G-minor/D-flat relationship in the opening *Allegro*. The subsequent alternation of lyrical and passionate episodes gradually fades away, leaving behind unanswered trills which, rather suddenly, move to G major and commence the third section of the piece, *Vivace*, a robust rondo-like movement bearing a close similarity to the finales of a number of Raff's symphonies. Its Haydnesque, folk-like character is deceptive though, for Raff subjects his materials to every kind of transformation, including resumption of development of the original G minor material. After a few brief recitative-like interruptions which make reference to the *Larghetto* and to the very beginning of the piece, the work concludes with the familiar Raffian device of simultaneous restatement of several of its themes together - in this case, the first and third sections' themes, in a celebratory coda.

Avrohom Leichtling

Reprinted by kind permission of DIVOX AG ©2008