

## Booklet notes by Avrohom Leichtling for DIVOX CDX 20905

Raff: Piano Quartet in G major No.1 & Piano Quartet No.2 Opp.202 Nos.1 & 2

[This is the full text of the notes printed in abridged form in the insert booklet]

In the year of 1876 Joachim Raff composed no fewer than six major works: in the spring, the Piano Suite in B-flat major; in the summer, the Symphony No.11 (originally intended to be his Symphony No.8); in the summer and fall, the Symphony No.8 (actually 9th in order of the completed symphonies); in the fall, his Cello Concerto No.2; in the winter, the two Piano Quartets performed here and the Cyclic Tone Poem for Violin and Piano, *Volker*. Recalling that Raff's 7th Symphony and his Suite for Piano and Orchestra were written immediately prior to these works, and that they were followed in the next year by the 2nd Violin Concerto, the massive choral-symphony-cum-piano concerto *Die Tageszeiten*, and the orchestral suite *Aus Thuringen*, these astonishing accomplishments, each characterized by unerring consistency and high quality, are most remarkable. Curiously, sadly, perhaps ironically at this time Raff's detractors were becoming nastier in their criticism of his work, and implying that he was on the decline! Raff had with bewildering speed flooded the market with an unbroken string of masterpieces; evidently ignoring Liszt's warning to him that he should be careful lest he be characterized as a hack (*vielschreiber*), or one who was "too prolific for his own good." Complaints about the prolixity of Raff's "politically incorrect" eclecticism added to the criticism leveled at him. This affected Raff deeply, as can be seen, for example, in his withdrawal of his original 8th Symphony (*Der Winter*) sensing as he did that it would be misunderstood. Raff immediately started another symphony, *Frühlingsklänge* (Sounds of Spring) which became his "official" Symphony No.8. The ever-more personal, dialectical cast of these works, with their often terse, "anti-romantic" rhetoric and stream-of-consciousness shifts of direction, was becoming the central aspect of much of his "late" music. While perhaps less typical of this shift, the two Piano Quartets are notable for their sobriety, their ineluctable urgency, and their often deep darkness.

It is typical for Raff to reverse, invert or otherwise transmogrify convention. The quest for "seriousness" in much music of the latter 19th century saw emotional boundaries stretched to an overarching "excess of suffering and torment," and to obsessive morbidity. Raff, for his part, rejected this aesthetic altogether, preferring to impose strict control over his musical angst (whose resultant fire was actually the hotter because it was so much more focused and concentrated). While perhaps eschewing any overall effect of a sense of cataclysm, it is far more subtle, even insidious. Brahms, by comparison, is frequently regretful in his music, often evoking a sense of resignation to fate or circumstance, whereas Raff displays indignation and an indomitable will to overcome adversity-- a crucial distinction and one of the signal differences between Raff and most of his contemporaries.

Both of the piano quartets follow similar architectural designs. Each is in four movements whose first and fourth are complex sonata-form structures. Each contains a breathless and urgent 6/8 second movement *scherzo*, in the tonic minor key. Both contain an extended slow movement, although the first quartet's is an elaborate set of variations whereas the second's is an extended tripartite structure. Both quartets are of

very nearly the same duration. The G major quartet was published by Leipzig firm of C F W Siegel in September 1876, and was first performed 19 February 1877 in Wiesbaden at the Saale des Restaurant Fieberger as part of its 11th concert of the Tonkünstler-Vereins. The C minor quartet, also published by Siegel, appeared in print a year later, in September 1877, although it had already been performed on 5 August of that year at a concert given by Max and Pauline Erdmansdorfer, two of Raff's principal supporters. Max Erdmansdorfer, the conductor, was later to assume the responsibility of preparing the posthumous publication of the manuscript of Raff's WinterSymphony.

The **G major Quartet** begins (*Allegro*) with a statement outlining a contradiction disguised as an innocent and utterly diatonic idea. The rhythmic shape of its four-bar phrase drives the entire movement. However, its first-impression simplicity masks the fact that it is comprised of a modulation beginning in the dominant key (D) then passing through the tonic key (G) and resolving in the subdominant key (C), as if taking its cue from the infamous opening of Beethoven's First Symphony. The piano answers immediately, beginning in the tonic key (G) but ultimately cadencing in F major, a key unrelated to G major. This is classicism turned inside-out, a joke worthy of Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), and even predictive of Sergei Prokofiev (1892-1952), whose own "Classical" Symphony of 1916-17 plays with similar tonal skids and back flips. Having seemingly failed to establish the tonic key, Raff undertakes an apparent course correction by bringing his four players together to extend the opening idea. Quickly caught up in the excitement of the debate, the music heads, however, for E minor which, although clearly related to G major, wouldn't ordinarily appear so early in a piece that hasn't yet even established its principal tonality. Never mind. A second thematic idea emerges, one with a bouncy, virtually balletic demeanour, passes through E minor only to land in F sharp on its way to B minor proper. An insistent triplet figure, together with associated modulations, arrives in the dominant key, D major, as preparation for the appearance of a third theme, fully redolent of passionate romanticism. Curiously, the piano functions solely to provide harmonic figuration, while the contrapuntal ardour of the third theme is given exclusively to the strings. One should note that only the dominant key is established clearly – G major, the presumed principal key of the piece, will not be resolved until the final cadence of the movement some 12 minutes later. Throughout these proceedings, there is constant back-and-forth imitation of the various thematic threads, almost always framed in fugal expositions. Indeed, it is the fugal procedure, rather than the succession or evolution of the thematic or rhythmic elements, that holds the thematic menagerie together. It is quite refreshing, and a wholly original method of structural organization. The preceding exposition is repeated, followed by an intensely elaborate development in which every possible permutation of the various thematic elements is tossed about, with ever-increasing urgency. There is no clear recapitulation so much as there is an ultimate convergence into the as-yet unestablished tonic tonality. G major emerges as the three themes reappear, much transformed, but now firmly in the tonic key. Raff's tour de force of tonal ambiguity totally avoids Wagnerian chromaticism, and is based almost entirely on redefining the most fundamental rules of chromatically unadorned tonal harmonic relationships.

Beginning with ominous D octaves in the piano, the second movement *scherzo, Allegro molto*, is a tumultuous, hobgoblin scherzo of the type that appears frequently in the symphonies – a breathless, hectic bogeyman. Critics and aestheticians have often dismissed Raff as essentially a Mendelssohn/Schumann clone. To connect to these composers, however, while clearly historical, is about as relevant as saying that Wagner was little more than an acolyte of Liszt and Berlioz, or that Beethoven was merely the sum of Haydn and Mozart (and perhaps three dozen others!). The four-square cut of its

phrases does have something of a Schumannesque quality, as indeed the fleet 6/8 meter might remind one of Mendelssohn. But the sheer intensity of the music, its twists and turns, leave these "influences" far behind. Unrelenting galloping triplets propel the scherzo from start to finish even in its moments of general relief, where there is suspension of movement in some voices. The cumulative effect of the simultaneous layered movement and repose adds tremendous edginess and forward energy to the whole, an inevitable demonic rush to the abyss. The scherzo is all the more effective precisely because of its placement relative to the dramatic but otherwise sunny first movement. The change from light to dark is stunning, and is not dispelled by its chorale-like E-flat major trio.

The third movement, *Andante quasi adagio*, continues the descent into darkness by means of an elaborate theme, eight variations and a coda-recapitulation. If one is reminded of the second movement of Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio, Opus 50, one must remember the broad influence Raff exerted in his time, when more "famous" composers often borrowed from him. Tchaikovsky's Trio was written in 1882 in memory of Nikolai Rubinstein, six years after Raff's Quartet. Its apparent Russian flavor is consistent with other passages in Raff's works and reflects his fundamental eclecticism; it is part and parcel of the panoply of Raff's *gesamptkunsktwerke*. The choice of key, E minor, would not be unusual for a work in G major, save for the fact that it is preceded by a tonic minor scherzo. The shift from G minor to E minor is jarring, and serves to enhance the Quartet's seriousness of purpose.

The twenty-four measure theme contains a complete tripartite (a-b-a) structure. The calm, steady tread of the theme is given by the piano alone. While dark in character, it is devoid of any hint of morbidity or emotional excess. The strings alone take the first variation, presenting a more decorative version of the theme by the violin, with counter-melody in the viola and a "walking" bass line in the pizzicato 'cello. The piano rejoins the strings in the second variation, and from this point each successive variation builds on the previous one by focusing on a different, self-contained elaboration of the theme and its accompaniment. Becoming increasingly more convoluted, the movement reaches an intense climax at the fifth variation, where the tempo doubles and the contrapuntal activity becomes most frenetic. The sixth and seventh variations, in E major, attempt a transformation into more passionate terms, but the tactic does not succeed. The tonality gradually shifts back to E minor and to the original tempo, as the movement reaches for one last, intense climax before sinking into its final, gloomy cadence in E minor.

Beginning with a question, the principal, obliquely Schumannesque main theme ("A"), in G major, is first sounded by the piano, and then with the addition of the strings. Its constant extensions and harmonic explorations are far removed from Schumann, though, and ultimately could only be a Raffian construct. A driving dotted rhythm emerges and evolves into a secondary idea ("B"), ultimately in D major. The "A" theme returns transformed, but the dotted rhythm and its associated materials insist upon an uneasy coexistence. Eventually, the tonality shifts to E minor, as a third set of ideas ("C") emerges over running piano figuration and string pizzicato. Very slyly, the first theme returns over the piano's figuration, "A," but its restatement takes the form of a fugal exposition and general development. A more formal restatement of the opening is followed by yet a fourth set of materials ("D"), this time in the tonic minor. At first, Raff gives us a whiff of a 'cello sonata, then of a trio by adding the violin. The second theme (originally in D major) is also reprised, now transposed to G minor. The third section (originally in E minor) is then brought back, but now transformed to G major. The work

ends dazzlingly with the materials of the first and second sections satisfyingly combined.

If the G major Quartet defines a descent into darker territories, then the **C minor Quartet** begins in the thick of a quintessentially "*pathétique*" ambiance. The harmonic ambiguities and playfulness of the G major Quartet's opening movement become an unambiguous C minor, out of which arises a terse motive presented in octaves in the lowest register of the piano, followed by subsidiary motives which, altogether, provide the building blocks of the movement proper. Once begun, the piano's obsessively running figurations remain in its lower register for the first eight pages of the score, while the strings carry the exposition of the primary themes in an ever-upwardly surging wave, evoking a veritable *De Profundis Clamavi*, that is, "From the depths of my soul I cried out to Thee" (Psalm 130). The obsession is gradually transferred to the strings, where a new, embryonic motive emerges as the music migrates into less forbidding territory. Arriving in E flat major, a more consoling music emerges, which remains welded to its reiterating motive and aims for a climax which is demonstrably the antithesis of the earlier parallel moment. Obsessiveness, the signal characteristic of this music, now posits a syncopated figure which overtakes the proceedings and leads to a return of the gloominess of the opening. As in the G major Quartet's first movement, the exposition is repeated. The transitional syncopations carry over into an elaborate, far-flung development consisting of four distinct episodes, each of which features a somewhat different mixture of the thematic and accompanimental figuration in the piano. Upon returning to C minor, we are given a terse restatement of the main themes. The piano emerges from the drama largely unaccompanied by the strings, and engages in an extended transition to the secondary materials, stated in the tonic C major. The shift to the tonic major, while refreshing, is short-lived. The exposition's obsessive syncopations return, and in their wake, an elaborate secondary development and coda to the movement ensues, bringing it to a resolute, *più mosso*, C minor conclusion.

The second movement *scherzo, Allegro*, while no less aggressive than its counterpart in the G major quartet, is more understated, even as its demeanor is one of breathless, fatalistic propulsion. Beginning quietly but with unrelenting triplet motion in the piano, the principal theme is stated by the 'cello, immediately answered in repetition by the violin. A second phrase with its repetition follows, more an answer to the first than anything else. Barely has this theme been stated, *sotto voce*, than we are shifted into the brighter realm of E flat major, where a contrasting theme is offered to counter the opening's thematic pair. At its peak, C minor returns, and with it a full statement of the first theme now stripped of all traces of subtlety.

Shifting then to C major, the *scherzo's* trio's hymnal aspect is offset by driving, static triplets in the 'cello and viola. Barely have these new ideas been stated than an elaborate development of all of the thematic materials ensues. Passing through a number of unrelated keys, the *scherzo* ultimately returns, but with the order of its themes reversed. Beginning in E flat major (the second theme), the *scherzo's* palendromic *da capo* works its way backwards to a full statement of the opening C minor material. The movement ends with a coda-as-development drawing the *scherzo's* four thematic threads together into a tight musical knot, ending mysteriously on a sustained C octave in the violin and 'cello with two punctuating C's in the lowest register of the piano.

The third movement, *Larghetto*, is an extended essay in Raffian lyricism, containing substantially darker elements at its core. Its general shape is ternary, but the presentation of its third leg is by no means a literal restatement of its first. Beginning

much like the variation movement of the First Quartet, although here in A flat major, the piano presents the principal theme with a vaguely Tristanesque flavor and, like the opening of the two previous movements, develops predominantly in the lower registers. Answered immediately by the 'cello, the theme is then given a full repetition. The violin and viola join for the second phrase of the opening section, with the opening's relative simplicity balanced by a more contrapuntal texture. The tonality, however, has shifted to live largely in and around C minor. The first phrase is now handed primarily to the viola, and in the principal key. The other instruments provide the secondary phrase's counterpoint in accompaniment.

Hardly has the opening section been concluded when we are plunged headlong into a dramatic middle section, now in the (enharmonically) tonic minor (G sharp minor). The urgency is enhanced by the slow-motion return of the running sixteenth-note figuration of the first movement, now made crisp and brittle, and also underlying the return of the first movement's dotted rhythms. This is interrupted twice, and the ambiguous nature of the harmony (simultaneous major and minor) makes the drama all the more palpable. After the second interruption, the middle section's rhythmic textures are joined to the opening section's thematic materials, thus enabling both sets of thematic ideas to be restated simultaneously. At the peak, all motion is broken off and a sequence of cadenzas, one for each of the four instruments, follows. Between each cadenza, the piano intones a fragment of the movement's opening, which gradually leads to a more complete restatement. Like the scherzo, however, the return of the opening materials is presented in reverse order: the middle C minor episode of the opening section is played before the main theme. The movement's coda incorporates the two middle sections' moments of hesitation, although now resolved peacefully in A flat major.

The final movement, *Allegro*, neatly draws together various elements of both quartets, and makes a strong case for the performance of both works together as a complete cycle. Beginning with the familiar Raffian feint of fragmentary suggestions of a theme (and in C minor), the movement opens with a pair of rather operatic recitatives for violin and then for 'cello. Interrupting suggestions of the Larghetto's hesitation motive together, with its cadenzas implies a Franckian internal self-referencing – but it is never more than an insinuation. The recitative gambit is also familiar from the finale of Raff's Sixth Symphony, where sly references to the opening of the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony provide a much appreciated humorous touch following an intentionally overstatedly serious slow movement. The quartet does not spend much time there, and is presently on its way towards music of a decidedly rollicking character which, finally, is unambiguously founded in C major. The constant rush of eighth notes dialectically dispersed among the four instruments is transformed from obsessive drama into fleet, forward movement. All of the piano's previously ponderous left-hand octaves are banished, replaced with a heretofore unexpressed mercurial lightness. It should be understood, however, that even the "unambiguous C major" cannot be taken literally with Raff. There are many instances of momentary harmonic side-slipping which add considerable spice to the harmonic palette. This is, after all, not your father's C major, so to say. Arriving at the second thematic group of the sonata-form exposition, Raff recalls two other favorite devices – the first being the effect of halving the tempo by the use of rhythmic values proportionately doubled in length, the second the avoidance of the so-called root position of the primary chord of the new key, G major. This rather simple device has the effect of delaying resolution and thus creating a great aural hunger for it. In the finale of his Eighth Symphony, Raff does not sound the principal triad in its fundamental position until the movement's coda! Here, the more relaxed and passionate nature of the second theme group has a more yearning aspect, facilitated by

its lack of a clear harmonic base. As in the opening section, there are many places where the harmony veers dangerously off course, always to be brought back safely like some cleverly designed roller-coaster whose sharp turns and dangerous dips leave you in high anticipation of an imminent doom which, miraculously, never quite happens.

A full development of the various materials is given, culminating in a breathless canon between the piano and the strings marking a return to the fugal practices of the first movement of the G major quartet. For once, Raff gives us a recapitulation in which the exposition's elements are given in their original order, now adjusted as one would expect to the tonic key, C major. A boisterous coda ends the movement, beginning first with imitative counterpoint leading to a full, half-tempo statement of the first theme and followed by a flat-out race to the finish line – and a gloriously upbeat resolution of the work's predominantly dark drama. True to himself, Raff does not end the work in an heroic fashion, but, rather, with sharply a focused, athletic lightness that rejoices in its own strength and cunning, in its native ability to throw off the weight of oppression by emerging into the light of celebration.

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