

# Joseph Joachim Raff

(b. Lachen near Zurich, 27 May 1822 - d. Frankfurt/Main, 24 June 1882)

## Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra N° 1 in D minor Opus 193 (1874)

Raff's first concertante works, *La Fée d'amour*, Opus 67 (1854) for Violin and Orchestra, and *Ode au Printemps*, Opus 76 (1857) for Piano and Orchestra, are fully the products of his association with Franz Liszt even as they differ stylistically from Liszt's concerti. The term 'Konzertstück' in Raff's and other composers' similarly titled works denotes a piece in the manner of a concerto ('Konzert'). The avoidance of the generic term 'concerto' provides a useful clue to the issues confronting composers in the early 19th Century as they expanded the concept from the received tradition of Haydn and Mozart, just as surely as their definition and adaptation of the term was at variance with the received traditions of the Baroque against which they themselves had rebelled a generation earlier. Standing between the late high Viennese classical school and the emerging early romantics, Beethoven's innovation of joining some or all of the individual movements of a piece into a continuous whole (as in the 4th and 5th Piano Concerti, the Violin Concerto and the Fantasy for Piano, Chorus, Soloists and Orchestra, Opus 80) had a profound influence on 19th Century concerto and symphonic principles. Clearly, Beethoven's focus was on the integration of the various individual movements to create an overarching and evolving structure whose underlying ethos was essentially dramatic in character rather than purely abstract.

A parallel situation developed with the symphony (in Beethoven's case, for example in his 3rd and 6th Symphonies) where the exploration of unconventional or through-composed ('durchkomponiert') structures found their 'excuse/justification' in the use of non-generic titles or texts that became the obfuscate generally known as 'Program Music'. The use of extra-musical starting points for new works required composers to rethink the inherited body of formal musical architecture in terms of literary, visual or even philosophical dramatic logic that could not necessarily be constrained by the use of a conventional four-movement layout and/or sequence of movement types. The resultant works often became known as 'symphonic poems' or overtures if they were in one movement, 'symphonies' if they were in more than one movement, or 'suites' if they used the devices of symphonic construction without the older order or with certain other constructive elements missing, reduced or increased in manner of execution. In virtually all cases, the underlying sonata form principle remained in place even as its dimensions, component parts and overall rhetorical scope became extremely variable. Raff invented one of the new concepts – the hybrid orchestral suite – as a

reincarnation of the Baroque partita cross-joined to the solo virtuoso concerto.

The works first cited above follow Liszt's example of the single movement concerto made up of a number of smaller sections played continuously and based on common materials. These pieces can be viewed as vastly expanded sonata form structures in which the alternation of fast and slow tempi and cadenzas, normally accomplished in separated, sequential movements, now placed the recapitulatory elements later in the piece. The remaining concerti are of two types: one utilizes the traditional three-movement structure, with full stops between movements and each movement clearly identified as such (the Piano Concerto, Opus 185 and the Second Violin Concerto, Opus 206), the other, three distinct movements (fast-slow-fast) following each other without pause and without specific delineation of individual movements (First Violin Concerto, Opus 161, the First Cello Concerto, Opus 193). Internal thematic cross-referencing is present in Raff's concerti exactly as in his symphonies.

Compared to the more flamboyant Piano and Violin Concerti, Raff's two Cello Concerti are models of circumspection, restraint and classical clarity and are the very antithesis of the majority of violin and piano concertos now in the repertory written in the 1870s and '80s. Raff's works for solo Violoncello are few in number. Aside from the two Concertos are the Duo in A, Opus 59 (final version, 1852), Two Fantasy Pieces, Opus 86 (1854), Two Romances, Opus 182 (1873), and the solitary Sonata for Cello and Piano, Opus 183 (1873). The Duo, originally called Caprice, was dedicated to Bernard Coßmann, who would later champion the D minor Concerto. Coßmann also gave the first performance of Two Fantasy Pieces in 1855. The Romances were written originally for Horn and Piano – the Cello thus indicated is an alternative version, a fairly normal marketing practice for publishers who typically printed adaptations for alternative solo instruments or transcriptions or arrangements of new works. The Sonata is a major work, the equal of the five Violin Sonatas which preceded it. Raff's interest in the cello literature of the Baroque produced several experiments. His 'Six Cello Sonatas of J. S. Bach' of 1868 are actually adaptations of Bach's original solo suites (BWV 1007–1012) to which Raff provided the 'missing' keyboard parts. Interestingly, Robert Schumann had also previously tried his hand at 'completing' the Bach original. In 1875, Raff provided piano accompaniments to 'Three Cello Sonatas of Benedetto Marcello', the 18th Century Italian composer (1686–1739) who would be the subject and principal character of Raff's opera Benedetto Marcello (1877–8). The year 1874 saw the production of several of Raff's arrangements and transcriptions of Bach.

As with Raff's other concerti, the present work was composed for an eminent virtuoso, Friederich Grutzmacher, in the Spring and Summer of

1874 in Wiesbaden. The premiere occurred on Wednesday, November 4th of that year in Dresden in the Hall of the Hotel de Saxe, conducted by Julius Rietz leading the Kgl. Hofkapelle orchestra. Grutzmacher had asked Raff to "...free us poor cellists from our truly constant and unbearable situation", by which he doubtless meant that he wanted a concerto written by a composer who understood the creative issues of fashioning a successful composition, and not one by a cellist who, although capable of exploiting the technical tricks of the instrument, would not otherwise have the necessary control of the compositional process to produce anything but yet another essentially empty Paganiniesque display piece built on the false foundation of virtuosity for its own sake. Grutzmacher played the work often. The cellist Bernard Coßmann wrote a new cadenza for the work and, whenever possible, played it under Raff's direction. The First Cello Concerto was published in its 'rehearsal' version, that is, the solo part together with a piano reduction of the orchestral score, in March, 1875 by C. F. W. Siegel in Leipzig. Siegel brought out the orchestral score and parts five months later in August of that year.

The D minor Concerto follows the three-movements-in-one model in which pauses between the movements are eliminated. The first movement does not come to a final, terminating cadence, but rather makes a transition into the second as if moving to another division within a larger, integrated work. The second movement comes to a quiet cadence but leaves the solo cello hanging on a sustained tone after the orchestra drops out. With only the slightest breath pause, the final movement begins in the same tonality as the second before moving quickly back to the Piccardian D-major.

The quirky, inverse nature of Raff's handling of 'traditional' practices and methods, although present in this work, are less obvious than in much of Raff's other work. The approach is decidedly understated and downplays Raff's more typically extroverted and flamboyant métier, which should not be mistaken for an attempt to 'play it safe'. Raff was principally concerned with clarity, balance and economy of means. Given the problems of projection, tonal quality and tessitura, Raff made the practical decision to lighten the orchestra as much as possible in order to avoid covering up the solo cello either with instrumental textures that would interfere with its projection or with excessively active contrapuntal movement or harmonic complexity against which the solo cello would have to fight in order to be heard over the orchestra. Raff almost always demonstrates that the smaller size of his orchestra is no obstacle to creating a big sound. In this work, he eschews extensive grandiose orchestral tuttis and keeps his orchestral accompaniments direct and simple. The consummate contrapuntalist, Raff misses no opportunity for imitative and contrapuntal byplay – the work is a marvel of intimate conversation and discussion – but it is the master's ability to keep contrapuntal activity under strict control that is one of the outstanding characteristics of this work.

Raff's accompanimental figures often assume lives of their own in the course of development of the principal materials. The opening dactylic timpani figure, like a subtle, heart-throbbing wink of the eye, assumes a major role as the first movement progresses. Raff reverses the usual procedure of orchestral exposition followed by solo entrance. A mere two measures of string tremolo and timpani suffice before the solo cello enters with the main theme of the first movement, which contains enough diversity of cellular motive and rhythmic variation to sustain an entire work. An abbreviated tutti leads directly to a secondary theme, first in F major, but ultimately in B flat major, in which the agitation of the opening is replaced with lyricism and a typical suspension of rhythmic activity accomplished by doubling the rhythmic values. A concentrated development leads to the recapitulation, which typically reverses the order of materials. An extended cadenza leads to a coda which does not end the movement formally, but rather trails off, landing at the B flat major second movement *larghetto*.

Raff characteristically reduces the orchestra in the slow movements of his symphonies and concerti to winds, horns and strings. Often criticized for his sizeable body of 'salon' pieces, that is, short, lyrical and relatively uncomplicated compositions in the 'popular' style, Raff's *larghetto* easily belongs to this category. It is so tastefully and expertly executed in every aspect that Raff successfully elevates the 'popular' style to the level of high art. The secret is Raff's use of the sonata principle as the underlying constructive element while its revealed side is its direct, deceptively simple lyricism. Flowing gently along in 6/8, the cello introduces its melody accompanied only by strings and occasional comments from the winds. The orchestra takes over immediately, modulating to G minor and presenting darker, more impassioned materials which dive straight away into an extended development before leading back to B flat major, where the cello's tune is similarly elaborated. With the orchestra's second tutti, a new thematic idea is introduced along with its development. The original theme is not brought back in its original form, but appears in fragments as the movement draws to an intentionally inconclusive and quiet ending.

The Concerto's finale (*vivace*) contains at least two priceless musical jokes: The first opens the movement proper by sounding 'vaguely similar' to the finale of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. Raff makes a good-natured parody of that movement even down to its phrase structure and built-in hesitations. Once past the opening, however, the gears quickly shift into a wholly Raffian world of structural and harmonic ambiguity whose syntax is anything but Mendelssohnian. Along the way, the beginning of a tune appears which resembles nothing less than the *Andante Cantabile* theme in the second movement of Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony – except that Tchaikovsky would not 'compose' the well known version of this tune until 1888! Further, Raff's version of it ALSO appears in his own 8th (that is, 10th) Symphony. Tchaikovsky was known to have

admired Raff – and the fact that both of Raff's works were widely performed at least a decade before Tchaikovsky started work on his symphony suggests that he may have been familiar with the germinal idea present in both works. The movement itself gives the impression of being a variant form of rondo – excepting that Raff does not follow the 'accepted' procedure of alternating his main theme with contrasting episodes. He presents instead a series of episodes that dissolve one into the next in true pre-cinematic fashion after each has undergone due development and extension. At times, the byplay between soloist and orchestra becomes almost operatic, suggesting recitativo accompagnato but always in tempo. The pathetic mode of the first movement returns mid-stream but is quickly resolved into a brief restatement of the opening Mendelssohnian puns before moving quickly to an affirmative but concise coda, which in a humorous throwaway gesture brings back the first movement's theme now telescoped, before ending with all its t's crossed and i's dotted.

Dr. Avrohom Leichtling, March 2009

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