

## Joseph Joachim Raff

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

### Suite for Piano and Orchestra in E-flat major, Opus 200 (1875)

By the time Joachim Raff began composing works for solo instrument and orchestra he had been in Franz Liszt's inner circle for several years as a full participant in the Weimar avant-garde and had been intimately involved with the creation and orchestration of at least two of Liszt's three formally named piano concerti. It is not surprising, therefore, that Raff's own first concerti followed, in a general sort of way, Liszt's model of interconnected, thematically related movements. Ultimately (and irrespective of their actual titles), Raff produced at least nine concertante works that survive: three for piano, four for violin, and two for cello. Two of these combine the concerto principle with the Baroque suite and partita. The most important of Raff's keyboard works are his seven suites for solo piano, in which the closed and generally rigid cast of the earlier forms was given new life with much more elastic melodic and harmonic attributes. The Suite for Piano and Orchestra in E-flat major, Opus 200, along with the slightly earlier Suite for Violin and Orchestra in G minor, Opus 180, artfully run 'traditionally' incompatible concepts together by transferring the now romanticized Baroque partita to the orchestra and, at the same time, overlaying specifically concertante elements upon them.

The decade of the 1870s saw the composition of 87 works, close to one-third of Raff's total catalogue, including five of his nine concertos, six of his eleven symphonies, four of his six suites with/for orchestra, the four Shakespeare Overtures and one opera. The Suite for Piano and Orchestra in E flat major, Opus 200, was begun early in 1875 and completed in April of that year. Additionally, 1875 saw the composition of Raff's 7th Symphony, Opus 201, the opera Benedetto Marcello, the Two Scenes for Voice and Orchestra, Opus 199, and several smaller keyboard compositions. The Suite was first performed from the original manuscript in Hamburg on Wednesday, 22 September 1875 in the Saal des Kurhauses, conducted by Gustav Härtel with Karl Faelton as the piano soloist. Numerous performances followed. The work was published in a number of different formats with the score and parts brought out by C. F. W. Siegel in Leipzig in February, 1876. A transcription for 2 pianos was published posthumously in 1883. Reductions for solo piano of two of its movements appeared in 1877 and 1880, as did a version of the third movement for piano 4 hands. Except for a transcription of the minuet movement for solo piano, Raff himself did not prepare any of the other arrangements. The Suite's five movements, Introduction and Fugue, Minuet, Gavotte and Musette, Cavatina, and Finale, are scored as are most of Raff's

concertante works for very practical forces comprised of 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 2 Horns, 2 Trumpets, Timpani and Strings. Raff's use of the 'Haydn orchestra' is particularly and typically deceptive, considering that the manner in which he handles the ensemble is anything but 'classical' and demonstrates how he was indisputably one of the great orchestral composers of the period.

The opening Introduction and Fugue is the most adventurous of the five movements. Its mixture of methods satisfies none of its sources yet produces, through its very ambiguity, a completely different kind of piece than any one of its component parts alone would suggest. It begins with a grandiose orchestral statement that does little more than establish E-flat major. The piano immediately interrupts in a somewhat singular fashion which, while giving snippets and hints of the fugue subject to follow, nevertheless seems more akin to the cadenza one expects towards the end of a movement rather than at its very opening. The second orchestral statement barely begins before the piano interrupts again for another extended extemporization which arrives, deceptively, in G minor before moving on and gradually transforming the amorphous material, with a third introduction from the orchestra, into the subject which begins a straightforward four-voice fugal exposition. The episodes between statements of the fugue subject more nearly resemble a sequence of sonata form developments than anything else. The fugue subject is played against itself in inversion, a neat contrapuntal trick and sure evidence of Raff's well-deserved reputation as a master contrapuntalist. Much of the piano writing (while the orchestra is busy developing the fugue subject) resembles nothing less than the Hanon keyboard exercises which have bedeviled pianists since they were first introduced into the wonderful world of piano pedagogy. Yet Raff, like Shostakovich some eighty-plus years later in his Second Piano Concerto, turns these humdrum exercises into a marvelously humorous counterpoint of parallel musics – two kinds of academism producing something distinctly unacademic. In the final analysis, the movement, in addition to its other stylistic and procedural adaptations and accretions, also marries fugal procedures to the monothematic sonata form structure – a clear, if mercifully shorter descendant of the Grosse Fuge, Opus 133 of Beethoven.

The second movement posits a militaristic minuet in the best tradition of the Haydn London symphonies going head-to-head with alternating episodes of verdant romantic lyricism. Typically, Raff's alternating episodes are in keys totally unrelated to the tonic E-flat major. The minuet proper begins stridently with dotted rhythms, incisive left hand octaves joined to a full-fisted right hand diatonically harmonized melody. The solo piano opening is answered by brass and timpani with echoing comments from the winds and strings. Then, barely past two statements of the minuet's initial phrase, the instrumental texture and stolid

harmonic base disintegrates, giving way to music of a totally opposite character and in E major, perhaps the most distant key imaginable. All becomes salon-style lyricism, and largely for the piano alone. The thematic material, sweet sixths, is accompanied by the 19th Century equivalent of the old Alberti bass – with filled-in chords and not merely the Mozartian outline of them. Curiously, only the piano's key signature changes; the rest of the orchestra keeps the E-flat key signature. When a full restatement of the minuet is given, it is the orchestra in all its militant sheen that states it while the piano is content to engage in a bit of contrary and wholly unprepared noodling – a caricature of the kind of virtuoso filler that often covers the pages of many concertos written by virtuosi for their own professional aggrandizement. A reiterated A-flat – G melodic cell hints at a modulation to C minor, but Raff typically turns the modulation on its ear and leads us to C major – which at least connects it harmonically to the previous E major section by virtue of the common tone of E natural. Beginning with a solo horn answered by a solo oboe, a wonderfully lyric episode marked *Un poco meno mosso* is accompanied in good *accompagnato* style by an arpeggiating piano. Episodes in which the piano is either unaccompanied or, alternatively, accompanying the orchestra follow in succession. The full orchestra returns – but not with a restatement of the minuet so much as a formal development of its principal materials. The writing for the piano becomes increasingly more filigreed. Elements of the trio's original horn melody vie for supremacy with the original minuet theme. Ultimately, Raff brings back the minuet in its original form. Along the way, there is a brief flirtation with the trio's materials again – in C major (but with the E-flat signature), but for piano alone and only for the purpose of suggesting a Beethovenian double trio. A much truncated four-bar restatement of the opening breaks the piano's reverie and ends the movement in the affirmative.

The musette originally was a bagpipe-like instrument common in 18th Century France. Music written in imitation of its characteristic droning often sounded sustained parallel fifths in the bass registers of whatever instruments were used. Since it also frequently resembled the Gavotte in its rhythmic cast, the pairing of the two variant Gavotte forms became a standard configuration, especially as composers 'remembered' the baroque era. Raff's third-movement pairing appears to be an intentionally traditional one. However, his treatment of the form more closely resembles the preceding minuet than an updated replication of the older form. As before, the piano, now firmly in C minor, begins the movement alone and is soon joined by the orchestra – but the squared-off, stilted nature of the music is balanced curiously with a completely understated orchestral response to the solo piano. Similarly, there are long episodes played by unaccompanied piano during which the Gavotte's materials are developed and extended, all while maintaining the strictest two-to-the-bar metricality. The contrasting musette, in C major, accommodates the traditional pastoral nature implied in its name, complete with droning

fifths in the cellos and basses. Unlike the minuet, however, Raff's musette places the focus entirely on the piano – the orchestra role having been reduced to a minimum. The return of the gavotte proper is handled similarly to the reappearance of the previous movement's minuet. The repeat is largely a literal one except that, as before, hints of a repetition of the musette are not fulfilled. These hints serve as a diversion, cut short with an abruptly rude ending in C minor.

Cavatinas occur eight times in the body of Raff's work. Originally associated with opera and specifically as the technical description of the tripartite aria of relatively simple construction that came to take the place of the Baroque da capo aria, the concept of brief, relatively straightforward lyrical instrumental movements began to appear early in the 19th Century. The most famous cavatina of all time, of course, is the 3rd movement of Raff's Six Morceaux, Opus 85 for Violin and Piano. So well known in its day was this little gem that it was the one piece of that kept Raff's name alive for over a century after his death in 1882. The example in the present Suite, in A-flat major, is an appropriately brief, utterly middle-era romantic arioso. But the simplicity of its sixteen-bar theme (consisting of four four-measure phrases), presented initially by the strings, followed somewhat more elaborately by the piano and then with a fuller orchestral setting, completely misleads the listener into an expectation of a simple, salon-like interlude. Quite without warning, the tonality shifts to E major (the common tone between the passages being the enharmonic A-flat/G-sharp), where a second, somewhat more florid melody is given by the piano with orchestral comments. After a return to the A-flat opening theme, matters might have remained static but for a concentrated if subdued development – a sonata form structure hiding behind that deceptively simple opening melody. Numerous shifts of key (and key signature) follow as the head of the initial melody becomes the focus of musical discussion. Upon returning to A-flat major, the theme is given its fullest statement, and the movement ends as many of Raff's sonata form structures do, with both themes, now reconciled to the same tonality, presented simultaneously.

The finale has a rhetorical stance familiar from many of Raff's concerti and symphonies – an energetic and high-spirited romp that generally avoids heroic overstatement. Raff was often criticized for writing finales of insufficient melodrama. For Raff, the resolution of musical drama frequently involves dissipation of the tension that has already accumulated earlier in a work. In the case of the Suite, the fugue, minuet, gavotte and cavatina have already taken over 30 minutes. Given the often intense nature of that half hour, the finale, at 10 minutes' duration, provides the necessary dramatic release by allowing its pianistic pyrotechnics and Hanonesque noodlings to skirt dangerously close to Offenbach, Delibes, the French Quadrille and the Can-Can (which is, after all, a dance form). Raff's preoccupation with French subjects throughout

his life but especially in the period of the 1870s doubtless raised lots of German eyebrows in disapproval. With an aplomb typical of this fundamentally eclectic composer, the ruffles and rouge of his insouciant finale uses as its second theme (in the wholly academic tonal relationship of the dominant) nothing less than the fugue subject of the first movement, but now stripped of serious pretense and transformed with a wink and a nod into high-spirited frivolity! Altogether, this delightful Franco-German firecracker thoroughly dispels the heroic-slash-serious nature of the opening Introduction and Fugue, the militarist-ic minuet, the aggressive Gavotte and the cantabile cavatina with clear-cut thematic material, straightforward ballet-like accompaniments, and rapid fire alternation between solo and tutti. As in the previous movement, Raff runs his themes together at the end, not in a blaze of glory, but with ironical brevity of expression and bubbling wit.

Dr. Avrohom Leichtling, February 2009

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