

Booklet notes by Dr Avrohom Leichtling for Sterling CDS 1075

Raff: Violin Concerto No.1, Suite for Solo Violin & Orchestra & *La Fée d'Amour*

The present CD brings together performances of three of the four of Joachim Raff's concertante works for solo violin and orchestra. Taken as a group they afford us the opportunity to observe the wide variety of compositional activity that is typical of Raff's output across all genres and forms. While the narrow-minded musical politics of the past that ultimately produced the ossified "standard repertory" of today has generally been content to dismiss Raff condescendingly as little more than a "composer of program symphonies," the fact remains that he was 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. Often excoriated in his time for the apparent ease with which he produced one major work after another, his absolute rejection of any particular trend or fad in place of a fundamentally broad based and all-inclusive eclectic aesthetic was at least a century ahead of its time. The present gradual re-emergence of his music more than a century after his passing now makes it possible to recognize the absolute master that he was and to bask in his altogether remarkable compositional legacy.

Joachim Raff, the first son of Franz Joseph and Katharina Raff, was born on 27 May 1822 in Lachen, Switzerland. In her biography of her father, Helene Raff notes that her grandmother's labor was accompanied by the tolling of the Church bells at Pentecost, and that it later became a family joke that he was destined to become a musician due to this accompaniment to his birth! Raff showed early musical talent. As a child, he would often sit on the shores of Lake Zürich listening to the distant sound of bells, and hearing strange melodies. Years later, Raff would remember these experiences in the otherworldly conclusion to the third movement of his Eighth Symphony. Although destined for a teacher's career, in imitation of his father, Raff's interest in music began to overshadow all else such that by 1840 he was already composing the earliest works in what would ultimately become a catalogue of nearly 300 pieces. Although entirely self-taught as a composer, Raff made contact with Felix Mendelssohn with the intention of studying with him. Through Mendelssohn's intercession Raff found his first publisher, Breitkopf und Härtel although ultimately he did not study with him. In 1845, he met Franz Liszt - the story of their meeting is an extensive chapter in itself. Liszt took a liking to the young musician and, on the spot, brought him into his Weimar entourage where he ultimately came to function as factotum for the older composer. Raff, who had only one orchestral composition of his own at this point, nevertheless was actively involved with the orchestration of a number of Liszt's works. Although deeply involved with the musical *avant garde* of Weimar (including, in addition to Liszt himself, Berlioz, Wagner, Peter Cornelius and others), he eventually found his own compositional inclinations headed in a very different direction. In 1856 he broke with Liszt and his group and headed off, in an utterly characteristic manner, on his own. In 1863, his official First Symphony (*An das Vaterland*) won a prestigious competition which brought his work to a much wider audience. His close personal friendship with the pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow was of major importance in the dissemination of his music. Raff's fame as a composer spread far and wide, his music was performed everywhere, until he was regarded as one of the foremost composers of his day, which precipitated the inevitable

reaction. Raff's interests in all things were far too broad to be restrained by any specific or explicit method or aesthetic. He was as interested in the music of the Renaissance as he was in the music of the future. He wrote quickly and with solid craftsmanship, always seeking the path not already taken, always exploring. For most of his colleagues in the 1870s this meant aligning with either the Wagner or the Brahms camps. His resistance to this trend ultimately did not endear him to the 'important' people of the last years of the 19th century and his posthumous reputation collapsed spectacularly. Although Raff lived in Wiesbaden as an independent composer and teacher for many years, he moved to Frankfurt in 1878 where he proved to be the immensely able and respected first director of the city's Hoch Conservatory His innovations in teaching and administration resonate even today. Raff died 25 June 1882, shortly after his sixtieth birthday, of a heart attack.

The three works performed on the present recording represent Raff at opposite points in his life. They demonstrate clearly how, on one hand, he was able to resist the strong influence of his mentor, Liszt, while at the same time developing independently an approach to the concerto form that resembled Liszt's if only at arm's length. Two of the works, on the other hand coming much later in his career, show us Raff not only as the master of the romantic violin concerto but also as the precursor of the 'Back to Bach' movement that typifies the neo-classicism that would not become manifest for another fifty years.

It is remarkable, but altogether typical that the decade Raff spent in Liszt's entourage produced only a few works that could be called Lisztian to any degree. Given that virtually all the first forty works in Raff's catalogue are piano compositions or lieder, one might expect that something of the flashy virtuosity which was Liszt's trademark would have rubbed off on the younger composer. Raff, however, was largely indifferent to it and pursued the composition of a wide variety of piano pieces ranging from sonatas and collections of pieces to operatic transcriptions and a certain number of what are disparagingly referred to as "salon" pieces - or works of a more direct or even "popular" nature. Raff approached all of these with the exacting precision of a master and treated all of these diverse genres with near equal seriousness of intent and technical aplomb. Raff, unlike Liszt, was not a virtuoso pianist. One could without exaggeration say that his answer to Liszt was to become a virtuoso composer of such equivalently massive technique and invention that it enabled him to deal with practically any kind of creative problem. Liszt is known to have criticized Raff for his fecundity (but not for the obvious reason of writing poorly or inconsistently as a function of volume). Raff, especially after he broke with Liszt, became, if anything, even more productive.

Between 1853 and 1882, Raff produced sixteen works for solo violin including four concertos, five sonatas with piano accompaniment, and seven 'miscellaneous' works with piano accompaniment (including the famous *Six Morceaux*, Opus 85 whose *Cavatina* became the sole piece to survive its composer). Nearly all of the above-mentioned works were written for and/or dedicated to the most prominent violin virtuosos of the day: Ferdinand David, Henri Vieuxtemps, Pablo de Sarasate and Joseph Joachim amongst others. Typically, Raff's concept of the concerto often does not toe the line insofar as academic definitions are concerned. Two of his four 'concertos' are more *de facto* rather than, strictly speaking *concerti de jure*.

The charming ***La Fée d'Amour*** in A minor was written towards the end of 1854 and subsequently published by Schott in 1877 as his Opus 67, is such a *de facto* concerto. Raff 'officially' refers to it as a concert piece. On 20 April 1855 Raff presented a concert

of his own works in the Grand Ducal Theater of Weimar consisting of a Grand Symphonie in E minor, *La Fée d'Amour*, *Traumkönig* (for soprano solo and orchestra) and Psalm 121 for solo voices, chorus and orchestra. The aforementioned symphony disappeared from the scene thereafter never to be heard or seen again although two of its movements surfaced ten years later in Raff's First Orchestral Suite, Opus 101. *Die Liebesfee* (to use its alternate German title) was first performed by violinist Edmund Singer, the concertmaster of Liszt's Weimar orchestra and also a composition student of Raff's along with Alexander Ritter. The connection, then, between Raff and Richard Strauss via Ritter should become fairly obvious!

The work itself follows the general example of Liszt in his three piano concerti, namely, the condensation into a single movement of the architectural design normally spread out over three and unified by common materials. But aside from a few perhaps distantly recognizable common tone modulations that have a wisp of Lisztianess about them, the work as a whole appears to be reminiscent of other composers: the Mendelssohnian fleet woodwinds, the orchestral and harmonic coloration and virtuosity of the Rimsky-Korsakov of *Snegorouchka* (even as it is scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, timpani and strings), the soaring lyricism of the early Tchaikovsky symphonies, the Franco-Spanish flavor of Edouard Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole*, the neo-classic clarity of Saint-Saëns' First Violin Concerto - excepting that none of these works had been written in 1854 when Raff wrote his concert piece. The amazing thing is how all of these "influences" turn up in the course of a piece that is barely twenty minutes long. This early propensity for the use of a multiplicity of technical devices, often snidely called 'eclecticism', is the single most characteristic aspect of the work. As Raff's idiom matured the characteristic types present in this concert piece provided the essential ingredient of unexpectedness that came to be present throughout his entire output. The structure is concise and direct: an *allegro* with brief introduction, an extended slower middle section, a development of the *allegro*, a longish cadenza, and a coda which combines the aspect of recapitulation and conclusion. Along the way the piece makes numerous atypical changes of tonal center which are so deftly set up that one is hardly aware of them. The near total absence of Lisztian or Wagnerian chromaticism in the piece is quite astonishing considering in whose company it was written. Raff may have taken Liszt at his word and found an entirely different way of saying very Lisztian things!

By the time of his **First Violin Concerto** (in B minor), Opus 161 in 1870, written for the noted virtuoso August Wilhelmj some seventeen years after *Die Liebesfee*, Joachim Raff had composed nearly one hundred other works. He had several major publishers, and performances of his music were being greeted with much approbation wherever they were given. Yet the work until now known as Violin Concerto No.1 is not Raff's version of his own work. Indeed, even as the title page of the original edition as published by C. F. W. Siegel lists the "*Original-Ausgabe* and the *Neue Ausgabe frei bearbeitet von August Wilhelmj*", it was not until 23 September 1930 that The Sibley Library of the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York acquired a copy of Raff's orchestral score of his own concerto from the Berlin firm of Leo Liepmannssohn, *antiquariat*. The present recording, along with a newly engraved edition of the original version published by Edition Nordstern (Stuttgart) makes Raff's original available for the first time in over 130 years. Were it not for that happenstance acquisition in 1930, we would have only Wilhelmj's free reworking of the original.

Raff's considerable experience as a composer of solo violin music, enabled through collaboration with the virtuosi with whom he had worked previously prepared him for the composition of a concerto. Fully the mature composer by 1870 Wilhelmj's 'intervention'

is baffling. Raff had clear preferences in his orchestral works. His aesthetic demanded making more out of less. His orchestral writing tended to use smaller rather than larger forces - but in such a way as to compensate for size with an abundance of color. Raff's orchestral works were conceived directly for their designated ensembles, not orchestrated from generically conceived music. Raff was also the consummate contrapuntalist whose contrapuntal writing was Bachian in its method, its clarity and, consequently, its complexity which is not at all surprising other than for its time.

Similar to *La Fée d'Amour*, the Concerto's three movements are laid out as a continuous span of music. Being a much larger work, however, there is clear thematic and material delineation between the movements even though there are no pauses between them. The focus, being a concerto, is fully on the violin solo. Materials are presented in a clear and succinct manner. The orchestral writing doesn't interfere with the solo violin. The solo part writing is clean with a minimal amount of internal figuration or empty noodling. It is demanding without being flashy for virtuosity's sake. Raff, while maximizing color, never clogs his work with gratuitous elaborations or "extras." In this way, he keeps attention focused on the materials of the piece, not the decorations which, although present, are made to fill compositional imperatives, not the glitter and empty facade of a circus. This would have been especially true for the finale, *Allegro trionfale* whose listeners at this time simply could not have avoided the association with the German victory in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870/1871. Even more, the first measure of the march theme is identical to the *Deutschlandlied* (Fallersleben/Haydn), although it must be said, that the *Lied* became the German National Anthem only in 1922. Prior to this it was known as a patriotic song but the official anthem was *Heil Dir im Siegerkranz* sung on the melody of the English God save the King/Queen. In any case, Raff surely felt as a German patriot but he had some south German reservations about the new empire dominated by Prussia. Today, it is not difficult to interpret the finale as parody on dumb nationalism, but it's hard to say whether Raff really meant it that way.

Keeping these observations in mind, a full disclosure of the changes imposed on the work by its misguided arranger would require a book length analysis. Consequently a number of more general comments will suffice to provide the essence and the flavor of Wilhelmj's corruptions.

A simple comparison of the bar counts between the two versions provides the first clues:

	Raff	Wilhelmj
1st Mvt.	320	306
2nd Mvt.	179	159
3rd Mvt.	209	193
Total	708	658

Whilst the practice of making cuts in the finished version of compositions is amongst the most wide spread and ethically questionable of established performance practices, if Wilhelmj had restricted himself that way, the result could be understood, if not condoned, in that context. However, the altered version does more than cut out whole chunks of music. Entire passages are reconceived, the violin writing is, throughout, transformed into one of showy, outrageous virtuosity. Where Raff avoids internal ornamentation or 'harmonic polyphonic elaboration' (as opposed to thematic or motivic polyphony), Wilhelmj muddies the waters with extraneous and empty counterpoint that draws attention away from the soloist. It follows, therefore, that the harmonic movement of the piece is also similarly altered. Where Raff purposefully avoids concluding the first movement by allowing it to simply dissolve directly into the second,

Wilhelmj insists on a B minor fire and brimstone ending. Where Raff reduces his orchestra in the middle movement such that the violin is accompanied for long stretches by strings alone, Wilhelmj throws in the kitchen sink not only by adding instruments and completely changing the instrumentation but also by the imposition of unnecessary contrapuntal static. Where Raff saves his trombones for the finale, thus focusing attention on them, Wilhelmj brings them in right from the first measure of the first movement. The entire opening of the first movement, indeed the entire concerto, while retaining the shape and general substance of Raff's notes is completely and thoroughly distorted and corrupted. The net result of these modifications is to take Raff's earnest and balanced piece and to turn it into a kind of Joachim Ilyitch Tchaibrahm-sky mish-mash.

For the rest, the original version of the Concerto was given its first performance on Thursday, 24 August 1871 in the Kurhaus in Wiesbaden, the place where many of Raff's orchestral works were heard for the first time. The work was conducted by Wilhelm Jahn and played by Wilhelmj. Numerous other performances were given afterwards. The piano reduction and orchestral parts were published by Siegel in November, 1871. Raff's orchestral score was never published. It remained until Wilhelmj rewrote the piece that an orchestral score was actually printed, although this first edition was not an engraving: it was, rather, a handwritten halographic print.

Although Johann Sebastian Bach's music all but disappeared for most of the Century following his death, during the first half of the 19th century a gradual swelling of interest developed which, aided largely through the efforts of Goethe, Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann eventually bore fruit in 1850 with the establishment of the Bach Gesellschaft whose purpose was to publish a complete urtext edition of J.S. Bach's music. Interestingly, Raff's encyclopedic knowledge of 'ancient music' included a thorough familiarity with the baroque in general, and Bach in particular. Raff produced a number of transcriptions of various works of Bach including a full orchestral version of the Chaconne from the 2nd Partita for solo violin (BWV 1004). While it is commonplace today to think of Leopold Stokowski and Ottorino Respighi as the progenitors of the modern Bach orchestral transcription, it was, in fact, Joachim Raff who began the practice as early as 1873 with the Chaconne.

Transcriptions and arrangements *per se* were nothing new in Raff's time. However, what is both typical and striking of this composer was the focus with which he sought to create a compositional approach whose cognate forms derived from the revival of Baroque practices recast in 'newer' syntactical terms. Beginning in 1857, Raff composed the first of seven Suites for Piano whose structure and content are clearly derived from the Baroque suites and partitas - that is, the typical collection of dance forms common in early 18th century instrumental music. One can safely say, then, that Raff anticipated, by nearly half a century, the essential concepts and practices of neoclassicism (albeit from a 19th Century perspective) that would emerge after World War I, principally through composers such as Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, Alfredo Casella, Paul Hindemith and others. In addition to at least a dozen or more 'neo-Baroque' pieces, there are another dozen transcriptions and arrangements from Bach and others of the period.

Amongst these neo-Baroque pieces are two concerted works. The **Suite for Violin and Orchestra** in G minor, Opus 180, composed in 1873 for Hugo Heermann who had given the premiere of Raff's 2nd Violin Concerto after Pablo de Sarasate, for whom it was originally intended, backed out of the performance. This was followed, in 1875, with the

Suite for Piano and Orchestra in E flat major, Opus 200. Both works feature the amalgamation of concerto procedures with the formal strictures of Baroque dance forms producing a result clearly unlike either - a set of virtuoso Baroquish pieces with all the trappings of the romantic concerto absent the sonata form architecture and broad thematic shapes that are at the heart of the 19th century concerto. Here, an aria spiritually foreshadows the many Bachianas Brasileiras Heitor Villa Lobos would compose in the inter-war years of the 20th Century. Here, also, are highly mannered and severely restricted thematic shapes that look forward not only to Stravinsky but also to Benjamin Britten (as in Prince of the Pagodas). While it is doubtful that these composers were aware of Raff, his anticipation is undeniable and more than a little shocking when one comes to terms both with its existence as well as its time and place.

The five movements of the piece consist of a *Prelude* (G minor), a *Minuet* (G major), a *Corrente* (G major), an *Aria* (C minor) and *II Moto Perpetuo* (G minor). The work is scored for very modest forces: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings. The Suite was given a preliminary performance without orchestra at a soirée in Grenchen, Switzerland early in December 1873. Its first full performance took place on 9 December in Homburg in the *Salle des Kurhauses* performed by the Kurkapelle conducted by Gustav Härtel with Heermann as soloist. The score and parts were published originally by C.F.W. Siegel, Leipzig, in October 1873. The first modern edition of the work was published by Edition Nordstern (Stuttgart) in December 2005.

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