

**The Ten Sonatillen op.99
&
Six Morceaux op.85
of
JOSEPH JOACHIM RAFF**

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Joseph Joachim Raff (1822-1882)

When Raff wrote the Violin and Piano arrangement of the Ten Sonatillen in 1880, he enjoyed near universal acclaim as one of the great composers of his time. Shortly following his death two years later, the vast edifice of public and critical admiration he had painstakingly built over a long and productive career began to crumble. The decline was swift, and within a few decades his reputation was at its nadir. A downward spiral of such magnitude—probably unprecedented in the history of music—was bound to sweep along with it much that merits obscurity, but also much more that deserves to come to light. The Ten Sonatillen and Six Morceaux de Salon for violin and piano doubtlessly belong to the second category, as they are exquisitely-crafted gems in their own right.

Joseph Joachim Raff was born on 27th May 1822 in Lachen, near Zürich. His father was German, his mother Swiss, the daughter of a local cantonal president. A bright, curious child, Raff was interested in a variety of subjects. Early on, he manifested a particular fondness for music. His father, a schoolmaster, laid the groundwork for his education, sent the boy to the Rottenberg Gymnasium in his native Württemberg, then on to the Jesuit Seminary in Schwyz. The young man was subjected to a draconian discipline, but rather than stifling his intellectual and creative proclivities, it seemed on the contrary to stimulate them: he garnered prizes in German, Latin, and mathematics. (Indeed, he evinced throughout his lifetime a singular capacity to flourish under hardship and constraint, whether imposed or self-inflicted.) The Raff family was large and poor, and Joseph Joachim was obliged to take after his father and become a schoolteacher. Yet the drudgery of a schoolmaster's life could not last indefinitely, for music was his true calling. Largely an autodidact, he had always shown a keen interest in composition. Encouraged by the publication of his piano pieces op.1, he approached Mendelssohn, who enthusiastically recommended him to the Leipzig publishers Breitkopf and Härtel. In 1844, Raff gave up his teaching post and resolved to become a full-time musician.

Raff's long and somewhat controversial association with Liszt began in 1845, when he trekked (barefoot and through pouring rain, legend has it) from Zurich to Basel to hear the master perform. Liszt became his patron, saving the young Raff from indigence on more than one occasion by securing him employment—first in Cologne and later in Hamburg, where he worked as an arranger for a music publisher. A turning point came in 1850 with Liszt's appointment as Music Director in Weimar. From then on, Raff served the great musician as secretary, copyist, and factotum. Liszt had enough confidence in Raff's skill with the orchestra that he entrusted him with the elaboration of first drafts to some of his symphonic poems. (Although Raff was to thereafter claim partial authorship, historians have safely refuted such assertions.) Despite Raff's subaltern status, tense relations with Liszt's mistress, the Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, and chronic indebtedness, his years in Weimar were on the whole fruitful. His opera "King Alfred" was performed there three times, while his works grew in scope, doubtlessly aided by the fertile testing ground that Weimar and its orchestra provided.

In 1856 Raff left Weimar for Wiesbaden, marrying the actress Doris Genast in 1859. The union was a happy one and coexisted with a marked improvement in the family's material situation. Prolific, hard-working and ambitious, Raff produced the bulk of his most important and successful compositions during this period. Hans von Bülow, with whom he enjoyed a lifelong friendship, was a particularly vigorous promoter of his works. Growing renown led to his appointment in 1877 as director of the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt. His influence at the Conservatory was considerable. Certainly one of his most gifted students there was the American composer Edward MacDowell. An excellent administrator, Raff built the conservatory into a venerable institution while engaging as staff such eminent musicians as Clara Schumann. After years of struggle, poverty, and lack of recognition, Raff had finally achieved fame. He spent the remainder of his years in Frankfurt, where he died on June 25, 1882.

Epilogue to the eighteenth century

During his final years, Raff's music was highly popular and was widely performed throughout Europe and North America. Specialists deferentially pored over the scores of his large-scale

works; critics hailed him as the equal of Brahms and Wagner. A plethora of compositions in all genres flowed from his pen; his catalogue includes some 216 opus numbers, 74 unpublished works and another 48 arrangements of his own music. He wrote 11 symphonies, 6 operas, several concerti for the violin, piano, and cello; 4 orchestral suites, numerous chamber works including 9 String Quartets, 5 Piano Trios, 5 Sonatas for violin and piano, choral works, lieder, and over 150 pieces for solo piano.

Raff's detractors have often taken him to task for his lack of originality. I do not share this point of view. Despite the undeniable sway masters such as Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin and Wagner held over the young composer, his was a unique voice, recognizable from those of his contemporaries, yet a voice not easily assimilated to facile categories or "schools". He can neither be pigeonholed as a "New German" Wagnerian, nor "conservative" in the Brahmsian vein. Yet his influence on others was of consequence. Tchaikovsky, Richard Strauss, Mahler and his own student Edward MacDowell owed much to him; Tchaikovsky took some of Raff's symphonies as models; his admiration went so far as to lead him to quote from Raff's Tenth Symphony in his own Fifth.

These considerations notwithstanding, Raff certainly had his weaknesses. His ambition to prolificacy could at times entail a lapse into the cold chill of academic procedures when inspiration was on the wane. Raff's oft-noted intellectual brilliance could be a double-edged sword: aware of his mental virtuosity, he could not always shake off the temptation to fall back on purely cerebral processes; yet an over-reliance on the broad daylight of the intellect excludes by fiat those non-rational excursions into opaque, twilight realms that are the province of genius. While possessing that particularly Germanic penchant for schematic coherence, he strives to attain this quality, but in doing so sometimes resorts to those formulae which owe their existence more to complacent automatism than to creative vision.

Yet at his best—and it is only fair to judge an artist on those works which reveal him in his most positive light—Raff produced music of striking beauty. In turn colorful, full of wit, elegant and noble, with moments of rapturous melancholy and passionate lyricism, it is essentially the music of a singularly poignant sensuousness. Indeed, Raff strives to attain sensuous beauty in and of itself with the same dogged conviction that compels Brahms to reach for the sublime. He could only but acquiesce in Mozart's opinion that "music, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear, but must please the listener, or in other words must never cease to be music." To him, as with Mozart, the cultivation of beauty for its own sake was a first-rate value.

It is remarkable to what degree Raff partakes in those defining eighteenth-century attributes one would be tempted to describe as "classical". (The term "classical"—in its conventional meaning as applied to eighteenth-century composers—is an anachronism; common terms used to define the music of this period such as sober, pure, autonomous, absolute, or dispassionate lack historical foundation; after all, contemporaries of Mozart and Haydn—E.T.A. Hoffmann in the vanguard—considered them to be "romantics"; the widely disseminated concept of reified classicism is, alas, a purely nineteenth-century invention.) In an erudite article entitled "Classical," the New Grove Dictionary defines the "classical" composer as a master of all genres possessing a high degree of technical skill, as a cosmopolitan in style and outlook who aims for universal appeal. Most significantly, it presents two characteristic attitudes espoused by the classical artist, and more broadly, representative of the eighteenth-century aristocratic culture in general. One is « happiness in remaining within certain conventions or at least not straying too far from them—conventions that were bound to please and aid the public »; the other defines the "classical artist, regardless of the field or period," as he who "worked in complicity with his public, attempting to fulfill its expectations, and was not afraid to be pleasing or to submit to society's conditions."

These are precisely the attributes and attitudes that Raff prized so highly—all of which were shared by Haydn, Mozart, and their contemporaries. In light of Raff's aesthetic values, it is easy to comprehend why he deliberately constructs his themes so as to be readily accessible to the average concert-goer, and why he seems to relish in familiar but brilliantly effective

cadences and anticipative plot lines. It is equally understandable why he chose to consider himself as a kind of exalted artisan, who, through sheer mastery of craft in all genres, is capable of creating the musical equivalent of an impeccably-fashioned jewel. And he was perfectly content to work within the framework of established, even antiquated forms such as the baroque suite. Despite his proclivity for monumental structures, programmatic music, and intricate counterpoint, he is most at home in those delicate and polished works that enable him to give free reign to his gift for imaginative play of color, sophisticated harmony, timbral invention, and the lyric impulse. This explains his predilection for the orchestral suite—a taste his admirer Tchaikovsky shared—as well as for miniatures such as the *Sonatillen*—forms in which he particularly excelled. Finally, and in concordance with his eighteenth-century forebears, Raff's style cannot be categorized as national but rather as a cosmopolitan hybrid of German, Italian, and French influences. There was nothing in his temperament that prevented him from wholeheartedly embracing the Franco-Italian notion that music, whatever its pretensions, must first and foremost procure a sense of delight in the listener. It is for this reason that he does not shy away from the pleasant, the decorative, the feminine, or the effusively lyrical.

Yet it is primarily these aspects of Raff's style that would eventually put him at odds with a change of mood that had been looming on the cultural horizon for some time, for the concept of "great" music was in ascendancy—a music whose aim was no longer to satisfy an in any case ephemeral public, but to challenge it, even disturb it. Music, if it was to achieve significance, had to somehow be in opposition to its own time; it had to be fashioned for eternity, and alienation from the audience was seen as the heroic price to be paid if the artist's message was to be heard. No longer viewed as simply life-enhancing, music was to be life-transcending. The harbinger was Beethoven, his spiritual heirs Wagner, Mahler, and Schoenberg. And music, if it was to achieve transcendence, in short, if it was to be "great", had to be lofty, profound, even unpleasant if need be—or to quote Edmund Burke: "massive, rugged, negligent, dark, gloomy, solid." It was this view, buttressed by Nietzsche's attack on the cult of the Beautiful, that was to prevail in music criticism and in academia well into the twentieth century. Composers who by their very nature stubbornly refused to bend to what were perceived as the inexorable forces of history—an evolutive notion of music so widely propagated and internalized as to reach the status of ideology—were judged as simply irrelevant.

Unfortunately for Raff, history dropped him squarely on the wrong side of the ideological fence. And that is a pity. Because in renouncing the man altogether, we deprive ourselves of music that—at its best—offers us much that is stirring, delightful, passionate and again—all ideology aside—beautiful.

Zehn Sonatillen

The Ten *Sonatillen* presented here were originally written in 1861 for solo piano and published as three separate works (*Sonatille I*, *Sonatille II* and *Sonatille III*). The first *Sonatille* was conceived as a mini-sonata of three movements in A minor, the second in G major with four movements, and the third as a three-movement piece in C major. In 1880, Raff produced the Violin and Piano arrangement, published by Schuberth of Leipzig as *Zehn Sonatillen* in individual numbers. As separate pieces they stand well on their own, and to conceive of them as such is perfectly legitimate: apart from a brief resurgence of the first movement *adagio* theme in the last movement of the third *Sonatille*, there is really very little that holds the movements together structurally.

These miniatures sit very well in the violinistic idiom—with beguiling cantilenas and sparkling passagework—so much that one would believe they had been originally conceived for that instrument. They are extremely contrasted in both character and style.

The first *Sonatille*, a restless and passionate *Allegro agitato* in A minor, is the most somber in mood of the set. It is followed by an effusively lyrical *Larghetto* in the salon style, of an evocative sensuality. Daredevil momentum characterizes the *Presto possibile* in A minor, a

mischievous witch's dance (foreshadowing MacDowell's own Hexentanz). The most architecturally developed of the Sonatillen is the fourth, an Allegro in G major with highly differentiated thematic ideas. An initial gracious, cantabile theme is brusquely interrupted by energetic chords in dotted rhythms and brilliant episodes of passagework in the eighteenth-century Sturm und Drang style. The fifth Sonatille, a Scherzo in G major of Puckish wit and good-natured humor is followed by an ardent and confiding Andante (Sonatille No.6) in E-flat major. The inspired theme, although presented three times in the same tonality, is always revealed in a different light by varied accompaniments in the piano part; a dramatic outburst only briefly disrupts the prevailing atmosphere of tender resignation. An exuberant and joyous Vivace in G major, the Sonatille No.7 evokes images of bucolic revelry. The middle section is full of charm and bright optimism; the conclusion buoyant and raucous. The eighth Sonatille in C major, an Adagio non troppo in theme-and-variation form, is of a serenely religious character. Echoes of the baroque run throughout; the fourth variation is a canon in minor key while the fifth, *più vivo*, spins lively arabesques; the theme then returns in an atmosphere of self-abnegation. Marked *presto* and *leggiero*, the Scherzo in F major, though merry and sprightly, contains some menacing moments in D minor, contrasted with a suavely expressive middle section in D-flat major. The last Sonatille begins uncertainly, with alternating Adagio and Vivacissimo interludes, but the Vivacissimo prevails. It is a rollicking, rustic dance in C major—always playful, always in good spirits. An ethereal middle section—*dolcissimo*, quasi *campanelle*—suggests the innocent memories of childhood. Returning to Vivacissimo, the piece concludes the opus in an effulgent display of virtuosity.

Six Morceaux de Salon

The Six Morceaux de Salon belong to the numerous light and attractive pieces Raff wrote throughout his lifetime, pieces that were judged by his contemporaries as unfit for a composer of "serious" symphonies and string quartets. Raff did not see things this way, and neither should we necessarily, because many of the admirable qualities—sensuous melody, delicate charm, a feeling of vulnerability—that make his "salon" music irresistible and his more ambitious works so moving are one and the same. Raff wrote the group of six miniatures in 1859. They were composed in Wiesbaden and published by Novello of London as op.85.

The Marcia, decisive and stubborn, is of a disarming but appealing naiveté. After a delicate *tranquillo* section, the initial material returns and leads into a coda (*stringendo*, *più mosso*), a charging cavalcade ending triumphantly in C major.

Hauntingly poetic, the Pastorale suggests a make-believe vision of rural life, of wandering shepherds on desolate hills, of leaves rustling in the cold wind before the coming of winter. The middle section is of a *pianissimo*, gossamer texture, the whole piece tinged with quiet melancholy.

By far the most popular piece Raff wrote, and the only one still performed while his other music was forgotten, is the fervent and seductive Cavatina. Apart from Raff's own arrangement for violin and orchestra, scores of other arrangements exist. Because of this it could be heard almost everywhere: bands and salon orchestras performed it, including the salon orchestra of the "Titanic"! Its sentimental appeal was such that violinists of the early twentieth century made it a staple of their repertoire—both Maud Powell and Mischa Elman recorded it—and justly so, as it proves an ideal showcase for the violinist's imaginative use of *rubato*, *glissando*, and color.

The Scherzino is elfish and determined, with sixteenth-note passages that skitter along towards a *dolce* section of an amiable character, imbued with insouciant charm.

Raff's remarkable melodic gift is exemplified in the sweetly nostalgic Canzona, a cantilena tinged with a heart-wrenching vulnerability.

Hans von Bülow remarked: "With Mendelssohn, one must beware of playing too fast; with Raff, everything goes somewhat briskly." Indeed, Raff was fond of breathtaking Scherzos and

Tarentellas that compelled performers to become veritable speed-demons. The Tarentella in E minor, marked Presto, is such a piece. Exhilarating throughout, it rushes in excitement (stringendo, poco a poco, più mosso) towards a burst of pyrotechnics.

Bülow understood better than anyone else the role such pieces as the Morceaux de Salon played in Raff's enormous production. But more significantly, he understood the nature of Raff's creative and human gifts. To students attending the masterclasses he gave at the Raff Conservatory (named after the composer following his death) in Frankfurt in 1884, 1885 and 1886, he offered this farsighted assessment:

Raff is indeed uniquely situated in the history of art on this account, because he combined the most diverse styles and yet preserved the purity of all of them: the salon style in the best sense (in the salon music of Raff, a delicate irony shimmers through), and the strict style. Raff never aspired to appear more than he was, but to be what he was. How few are able to say that about themselves !

Seen in this light, it becomes possible to set aside everything that Raff was not, and simply appreciate him on his own terms.

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