

Joseph Joachim Raff

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

Suite for solo violin and orchestra in G minor (1873)

Three works written in 1872, the *Lenore Symphony*, the String Sextet and the String Octet are amongst Joachim Raff's major compositions. Two others, *Aus dem Tanzsalon* and the Suite for Violin and Orchestra, represent opposite but complimentary aspects of Raff's involvement with instrumental dance music. The former, a work for piano four hands and a romantic send up of the baroque suite with its chain of dance movements finds its opposite reflection in the latter, one of Raff's larger efforts at directly reviving the older form. In the Suite's case however, elements of the "old" and "new" styles were made to work together in surprising ways.

Any consideration of Joachim Raff's catalogue must acknowledge the fundamental eclecticism of its ways and means. Thus when encountering Symphonies, Concerti, or Suites, or any of the other standard generic titles in Raff's oeuvre, it is best not to accept them at face value. Raff often redefined the form and substance of these compositional types to suit his own purposes.

Raff's interests were not limited to the conventional foci of Romanticism. While he contributed major works of program music, a closer examination reveals a fundamental classicism running through them that serves to control and neatly counterbalance the expanded structures and extended harmonic language in unique, that is Raffian ways. In his lifetime the Brahms-Wagner debates polarized all aesthetic discussions. Historically these color our perceptions of the literature. When properly reintroducing Raff back into the mixture, a more accurate picture of the times emerges. Brahms who was generally considered the classicist wrote music that by and large encompassed as broad and overripe an emotional venue as anything in Wagner save for the fact that his canvases were smaller and his harmonic language not nearly as chromatic. In truth it was Raff who was the neo-classicist par excellence - for he was the one who imposed an Age of Reason intellectualism on the hyperbole of Romanticism. In this capacity he clearly anticipated the anti-romantic neoclassicism of the early twentieth century even as his posthumous reputation was smothered and other, later composers would be credited with having devised it.

Raff's involvement with the earlier Baroque and Classical periods resulted in many original pieces which welded romantic syntax to baroque figuration, forms and structures. While the mainstream was perhaps content to storm the heights of emotional and chromatic excess, Raff's activities were, from a certain point of view, indicative of a Janus-like approach which in looking forward also looked backwards at the same time.

We can assess the Suite for Violin and Orchestra from several perspectives. As an orchestral piece a definitive category is elusive since it seems to fall somewhere between the four purely orchestral suites with which it has little in common and the concertos, one of which it certainly is not. Raff's First Orchestral Suite, Opus 101 (1863), draws some of its materials from the "lost" E minor Symphony of 1854. Opus 101 established the principle of the five movement structure which Raff reserved for all of his orchestral suites. But the orchestral suites are comprised of independent, structurally developmental symphonic movements. The present work, like the Suite for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 200 (1875), while making use of developmental processes, nevertheless is founded on an essentially parodic approach to the dance types which populate the Baroque keyboard suite or partita. The baroque concept

of the “double” later became the trio in instrumental tripartite dance form derivatives, but was often an elaborate variation of the main section. Raff worked this into the general concept of developmental elaboration. Raff’s trademark device, the virtually instantaneous extension of pithily stated materials, is in evidence in this work even as its gestures and shapes derive from the baroque suite or partita.

In considering the suite from the perspective of Raff’s overall production for violin, the present work falls towards the end of a catalogue that numbers fifteen works, excluding Raff’s own rearrangements. Like Robert Schumann before him, all of Raff’s earliest works are keyboard pieces or lieder. Once he branched into other instrumental and vocal forms, the only solo instrument to which he maintained anything like his early devotion to the piano was the violin. There are certainly more works with violin and orchestra than any of the other concerto compositions.

Raff produced three violin concertos even though only two of them are directly called such. As with the *Ode au Printemps*, Opus 76 (1857), which is essentially a single movement piano concerto in the manner promulgated by Liszt, *La Fee d’Amour*, Opus 67 (1854) is a Violin Concerto in all but name. In the present work we are given five movements whose solo writing, notwithstanding their root dance form structures, engage the soloist in a good deal of concerto-like virtuosity.

Raff’s professional associations with violinists resulted in the composition of all his major solo works. August Wilhelmj gave the premiere of the 1st Violin Concerto in 1872 – and later issued his own, completely reorchestrated and somewhat modified version of the work. Pablo de Sarasate was the intended soloist for the 2nd Violin Concerto – which was ultimately given by Hugo Heermann, Raff’s colleague at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt to whom the present Suite was dedicated.

Aside from these however, Raff completed five Violin Sonatas which were written for and/or dedicated to some of the most important violin virtuosi of the day. The “*Six Morceaux*”, Opus 86, includes the famous Cavatina which long remained the only piece of Raff’s to survive him. The Suite for Violin and Piano, Opus 210, continues the use of the baroque partita as the structural basis.

Works based on “baroque or classical prerogatives” began to appear around 1857 with the first of seven suites for piano (A minor, Opus 69). In this, and other similarly named pieces we find collections of four or five movements with titles such as “Preludio”, “Mazurka”, “Toccatina”, “Aria”, “Fuga”. The Second Piano Suite substitutes a “Polka” for the “Mazurka”. The third substitutes a “Menuetto”. However, we should note that the dance types are not always purely baroque derivations. There are also five volumes of piano pieces arranged from J S Bach’s solo violin sonatas, an orchestral version of Bach’s *Third English Suite*, an orchestral transcription of the D minor “Chaconne” (from the 2nd Partita, BWV 1004). The baroque manifestation appears under different guises. For example the 6th Quartet (Opus 192 #1) is entitled *Suite after olden forms*. The 8th String Quartet (Opus 192 #3) is entitled *Suite in Canon Form*. The symphonies frequently engage in baroque fugal and imitative writing. Perhaps the most extreme example of Raff’s forwards/backwards style is the oratorio *Welt Ende - Gericht - Neue Welt*, Opus 212, whose spare fugal writing points back to Renaissance polyphonic practice even as it maintains its romantic foundation. All of these pieces borrow heavily from the melodic figuration and phraseology as well as the harmonic climate of the early to middle eighteenth century. Yet when one looks closely it becomes clear that Raff’s intention was not a 19th century equivalent of “Back to Bach.” Raff sought ways of reconciling the diametrically opposed forces of classicism and romanticism. The results, as exemplified in the Suite for Violin and Orchestra, produced a

remarkable hybrid style that could easily be called virtual surrealism. In its very proper manner, it nevertheless has all the sly humor, shock and distended perspectives that derive from the unexpected juxtaposition and distortion of familiar objects such as would later be popularized by artists such as Dali, or Magritte.

Even the briefest of descriptions of the Suite itself will provide many clues. The first movement, a triple metered Allegro in G minor, is labeled "Preludio". Traditionally, the prelude of the keyboard suite served as the free form fantasia of improvisatory character. Beginning with a quadruple stopped G minor chord in the solo violin, and then followed with busy passage work in double bowing, the upward moving sequences match the figuration typical of the Bach violin sonatas and partitas. The single voice soon becomes double stopped motion, which in turn becomes contrapuntal double stopping thus allowing the simple G minor opening to morph into a parodic fiendishness. Gradually the orchestra sneaks in overtaking the soloist, but landing on the dominant in simple, gentle quarter notes. The music moves to B flat major for a second theme. This new material overlaid on the quarter note motion begins as a busy counterpoint in the violin, and returns to the sequential writing. The orchestra and the violin operate on different temporal levels and remain quite apart from each other. By its end, we realize we've been given a perfectly normal sonata form exposition, with truncated if romantic outlines based on baroquish thematic materials. A very unusual musical contrivance this, given its disparate building blocks.

The remainder of the movement traces the development of the G minor / B flat major thematic pair, but then arrives at a restatement of both original subjects, in G major. This is then essentially restated in G minor. The 19th century developmental principle has replaced free fantasia even as it has been applied to its backwards looking materials.

The second movement "Minuetto", in G major, plays much the same kind of stylistic slight of hand and neatly demonstrates Raff's take on the concept of the double (as discussed previously). As with the first movement, the violin presents the minuet in unaccompanied quadruple stops. The orchestra answers pompously in a setting that would be quite at home in a late Haydn symphony. The second minuet phrase similarly consists of a pair of statements - violin alone, orchestra alone. Then Raff pulls the rug out, stylistically. The orchestra, in accompanying pizzicato strings with occasional wind asides permits the violin to engage in a highly ornamented variation of the opening. Bach-Haydn now becomes Chopin-Paganini. The effect is stunning, quite ludicrous in a way, humorous without doubt, and thoroughly surreal in its juxtapositions. The orchestra regains Haydnesque control, but then by common tone modulation lands in E flat major and at a faster tempo for the trio. Here, stylistic juxtaposition continues with the violin becoming even more acrobatic even as the syntax changes phrase by phrase. A much truncated return to the opening minuet concludes the movement.

The third movement, "Corrente", also in triple meter and remaining steadfastly in G major is built on Raff's favorite dactylic rhythm (an eighth followed by two sixteenths). The accompaniment is restricted to the strings which play static staccato chords like some gigantic bowed harpsichord continuo. Occasional wind comments, as in the minuet, provide subtle touches of color. The thematic materials' rigidity and use of sequence, are more purely mid-18th century as is the structure which is essentially a tripartite A-B-A with B-A repeated literally. The A section moves to the dominant, the B section moves to the tonic à la Bach. The extremely limited scope and exclusivity of the materials is itself a surreal distortion that would be quite at home in Benjamin Britten's "*Prince of the Pagodas*".

The fourth movement "Aria", in C minor, breaks the triple meter metrical lock with an essentially slow moving, 4/4 Bachian melody, first initiated by the winds but given an ostinato accompaniment that could easily have been the template for Heitor Villa Lobos' nine "*Bachianas Brasileiras*". The middle section reaches back to the mid 19th century - its subdued passion is calmly romantic.

The finale, "II Moto Perpetuo", returns to the 19th century as a much truncated but typical concluding concerto movement. The fleet, ever rapidly moving violin, in 6/8, is almost never given a moment's repose. The celli occasionally add a broad cantilena against the scurrying violin. At one point, the strings as a body get caught up in the violin's scampering, but only briefly. For a time, the harmonic climate shifts to the warmer G major, but then returns to dramatic G minor. In a flash, however, the piece ends with an abbreviated peroration resolutely in G major. In this movement Raff brings all the various elements together rather than playing them off against each other. One is left with a curious foretaste of the A minor Violin Concerto which would come some five years later. In the meantime, however, Raff would turn his attention to the Suite for Piano and Orchestra which would build on the exact same juxtapositional processes and attitudes of the present suite. There, the grandiosity of the romantic piano concerto would become the foil for yet another classical baroque suite with surrealist modifications and enhancements.

Dr. Avrohom Leichtling, October 2005

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