

# JOACHIM RAFF

## Violin Concerto No.1 in B minor

Op.161

After Joachim Raff abruptly gave notice that he was abandoning the security and constraints of his Swiss teaching position, he attempted to establish for himself a career as a freelance composer and pianist. The first compositions with which he ultimately announced himself were all written for piano, and even in his later career the flow of piano works never receded. A second major area of endeavor in his instrumental output, albeit less in number, is accounted for by his works for the violin, an instrument for which Raff possessed at least a rudimentary knowledge. In his works for soloist and orchestra, Raff output was relatively balanced; together with two violin concerti and two cello concerti he wrote one piano concerto. The first of this group of five concerti is the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in B minor, Op.161 which came into being in 1870-71 and was given its premiere in Wiesbaden on August 24, 1871. It is not known why Raff began relatively late in his career to write solo concerti. His growing fame, which manifested itself in the sensational success of the *Waldsymphonie* (1870), may have helped to encourage requests from established artists for works to be written especially for them. Above all in the case of the violin, Raff's reputation as a composer of effective sonatas for violin and piano had spread his name; they were dedicated to such famous violinists of the time as Hellmesberger, David, Laub, Vieuxtemps and Léonard. Violin concerti in the middle of the 19th century were composed by soloists primarily for their own use and for the most part remained unpublished, but the demands of the form grew immensely as a result of exemplary models by Vieuxtemps, Rubinstein, Saint-Saens, Joachim and Bruch, so much so that the efforts of the virtuoso as occasional composer were overshadowed. As a result of the growing artistic elevation of the form, the number of violin concerto publications also rose after 1870.

The soloist at the premiere and dedicatee of the B minor concerto was August Wilhelmj, generally regarded by contemporaries as "one of the most accomplished violinists of our time" . As a conductor Wilhelmj was an early proponent of Wagner, having served as concertmaster in the first presentation at Bayreuth of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. In the biography of Raff by his daughter Helene the following appears concerning the origins of Raff's Op. 161: "The master violinist appeared about every other day to be convinced that progress was being made on his violin concerto and to express views and suggestions". Wilhelmj took the B minor concerto truly to heart and played it frequently on tour in Europe and America. In 1872 he scored a triumphant success with it in Kassel during the final concert of the artist's festival of the Allgemeine Deutsche Musikverein. Twenty years later he decided to publish through the Kistner Verlag Raff's First Violin Concerto in a freely edited version. In the years thereafter the

publishing house offered both versions of the work at the same time, though the orchestral score of the original version was not printed but offered rather "in copy" by the firm. Recently there was a prolonged but unfortunately unsuccessful international search for this first version. Finally in 2003 Mark Thomas successfully located a score in the Sibley Library of the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. which corresponded in instrumentation to that described by Albert Schäfer in his catalogue of Raff's works. And indeed this score corresponded to the printed violin-piano reduction of the original version. In addition it was a surprise discovery that this handwritten score came from Raff himself and therefore was an autograph copy of the original version of the Op. 161 concerto. That this was the case was unknown even to the Sibley Library. Research into the purchase of the score revealed that the manuscript had been acquired by the firm of Liepmannsohn in Berlin for a price of 24 *Reichsmark*, which included a 10% discount! Apparently neither buyer nor seller was aware of what they had in their hands. It is indeed fortunate for us today that this autograph from Rochester can serve as the basis for the present first published edition of the score.

This is immensely important for the reception and research of the work, since an analytical comparison of the many variances between Wilhelmj's version and the original would be beyond the limits of this introduction. Wilhelmj composed a third of the concerto anew and undertook a thorough revision of the instrumentation, the most immediately apparent being the addition of trombones in the first movement. He attempted, as an adherent of Wagner, to "modernize" Raff's harmony and bring up-to-date the tonal spectrum to correspond to the then prevailing taste. From the standpoint of music history such effort is interesting, since it carries with it a picture of what the generation after Raff's death considered worthy of changes for the "better". In the light of today, such efforts are just as much a problem as Gustav Mahler's retouchings in the scores of Robert Schumann. That Wilhelmj's version was chosen for the first recordings of the two violin concerti by Michaela Paetsch-Neftel and the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra with Hans Stadlmaier was not an artistic decision for in 1999, the year in which the recording took place, neither a score nor orchestral parts for the original version were to be found. With the present edition of score and parts it is now possible to have Raff's original intentions resound. Just a comparison of the orchestral tuttis in the first movement reveals the differences in the sound ideals of Raff and Wilhelmj. Raff's original is obviously oriented toward Mendelssohn and his successors in the Leipzig school, and in comparison Wilhelmj attempts to harness the sound and to a certain extent the harmonic language of the "Ring" to the requirements of a solo concerto. Yet one cannot accuse Wilhelmj of artistic insensitivity. His work is well done and retains Raff's thematic material as well as the structural outline of the piece. For its time it succeeded in restoring an older work to a constantly evolving present. That this revision was considered necessary only 10 years after Raff's death, casts revealing light on the position of Raff's music in the years after his death. What was considered relatively modern

during his lifetime, proved to be reasonably quickly no longer contemporary and the work wandered to the archives.

Raff begins his first violin concerto with short chordal theme, which is malleable enough to serve as the basic building block of the first movement, *Allegro patetico*. The brilliance and brevity of this theme is somewhat unusual for Raff, who otherwise prefers broadly spun out lyrical themes. A chromatically colored phrase which follows alters the mood of the stern opening to that of the elegiac and thereby wrenches the emotional pole in the initial measures of this mighty piece, awakening the impression of a symphonic movement featuring obligato violin. The relatively dense symphonic texture in this movement is unusual for a violin concerto of the time but makes it a predecessor for similar compositions of later date by Dietrich and Brahms, though in this Raff could refer back to pioneer work by Schumann, Litolff and Liszt in the category of symphonically oriented piano concerti. Despite involvement in symphonic proceedings the violin part is handsomely designed and highly effective. Its flow is interrupted only by a few short orchestral interjections. In his youth Raff had received violin instruction and the influence of Wilhelmj on the composition of the work can account for sufficient provision of virtuoso fireworks. Raff however rejects long unaccompanied passages and even a solo cadenza, perhaps in consideration of stylistic unity within the overall symphonic design.

While Raff connects the first movement to the second with a short passage for solo violin, Wilhelmj brings the first movement to a decisive close in order to begin the *Andante non troppo* in complete contrast, with a songful theme on muted strings pianissimo. Unfortunately the contours are thereby somewhat disturbed and since Wilhelmj has clipped the reprise by a few measures in this tripartite movement, one has a bit of difficulty even recognizing the theme. In Raff's original the melody is more expansive in contour and is fully repeated in the reprise which makes the formal structure of this movement much clearer. A typical bit of Raff's playfulness - a canon at the lower fifth in the first part of the movement - is rejected by Wilhelmj and in its place he puts in a completely new passage, which is contrapuntally simpler and also harmonically more adventuresome.

The third movement, *Allegro trionfale*, puts filigree design on the sidelines and promotes a gratifying march, a form for which Raff, despite his totally non-militaristic nature, had a decided preference. Perhaps one may regard the themes of the Finale as somewhat banal, but once heard, it is difficult to get them out of your head. The martial impression of the introductory orchestral tutti, the character of which is strengthened by the addition of the trombones (in Raff's version only heard in this movement), gives way to a rather more playful and optimistic mood at the entry of the violin. In the middle section we come across yet another, rather dour, march theme which the violin engages with virtuoso abandon. Rather unusual for Raff is the fact that this trio part really

doesn't afford much contrast to the surrounding framework. Towards the end Raff teases with the beginning of a solo cadenza, which is shortly thereafter abruptly arrested by full orchestra - a fine example of the humor which Raff sprinkles in time and again and which is not entirely left out in this decidedly naïve piece. A passage of chromatically gliding modulations brings a change from the diatonically four square and proceeds to a brilliant coda in which both Raff and Wilhelmj go their separate ways, bringing the whole to an audience rousing conclusion.

It's relatively certain that this surprisingly affirmative finale reflects the elevation of public spirit which took off following the German victory in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, from which Raff - German patriot that he was - did not want to shrink. One can speculate that Raff's entire concerto reflects an appreciation of the political situation as related in his biography: threatening and aggressive in the beginning, but happy and congenial by contrast at its conclusion. Helene Raff writes: "The war of 1870-71 and its grand victory was followed by the creator of the *Vaterlandssymphonie* with passionate interest. Admittedly he had feared an ominous outcome at the beginning, so his surprise was all the greater at the almost providential gifts which German victories brought. At the report about Sedan he tearfully took his wife, sister-in-law and child in his arms, although for him, never having done military service, anything that had to do with war and weaponry was alien. It was not without pride that he pointed out that the Hohenzollern, under whom the ancient imperial crown had been restored, were of Württemberg origin and therefore as good as the Stauffer [Raff himself carried a Württemberg passport; editor's note]. Unfortunately there was much in the new Germany which disappointed him. The German idealist of the old mode residing in Raff felt alienated by the arid swindle of the Gründerzeit (period of industrialization initiated by Germany's unification) and the racket of nationalist enthusiasm made by those who rejoiced that a time of patriotism was at hand - for Germany had indeed become rich and powerful. He had imagined a unified Germany differently: more genteel, less pretentious. " The disappointments put forth here may be considered after-thoughts to a certain extent. In any case a German audience of 1871 would have understood the tempo characterization *Allegro trionfale* as clear reference to the conclusion of the war. And is it simply coincidence that the first measure of the march is identical note for note to the beginning of the *Deutschlandlied*? To be sure, this hymn with the Haydn melody was not the official anthem of the new imperial state, but, as any vocal collection of the period proves, it served as a vastly popular patriotic song.

Raff had never announced his joy at the outcome of the war more explicitly and in the years which followed he wrote neither songs of triumph nor imperial marches to celebrate either victory or empire. A characteristic of Raff which one can still today admire is that, despite his honest joy at the success of his own country, he did not gloat over the French, nor harbor ideas of hatred toward

them. Quite the opposite! Right after the war he dedicated his Fantasy Sonata for Piano, Op. 168 to the Frenchman Camille Saint-Saens and thereafter, to the annoyance of his publishers after 1871, doggedly attached French titles to many of his character pieces for piano.

The first publication of this Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra, Op.161 was brought about due to a planned recording of the work by the Umeå Symphony Orchestra (Sweden) under the direction of Andrea Quinn with violinist Tobias Ringborg as soloist for Sterling CDs. To the man who initiated all this, Mark Thomas of England who has documented the life, works and reception of Raff masterfully on his internet website [www.raff.org](http://www.raff.org) through many years, this edition is dedicated.

**Volker Tosta, Stuttgart, 2007**

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