

Joachim Raff

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

“Cavatina“ pour violin et piano Op. 85, No.3

Albert Schäfer's Chronologisch-systematisches Verzeichnis der Werke Joachim Raff's (1888), as edited and updated by Mark Thomas of The Joachim Raff Society (London), www.raff.org, lists no less than eighteen works for Violin solo (with piano or orchestral accompaniment) by Joachim Raff. These works include 2 Concerti, a Suite, and a Konzertstück, all with orchestral accompaniment, 10 Sonatilles (single movement sonatinas derived, more or less, from Raff's Opus 99 Three Sonatilles for piano), 5 full length violin and piano sonatas, a number of shorter collections or single movement duos and fantasias, and the Six Morceaux. Of all these works (to say absolutely nothing of the remainder of Raff's catalogue of nearly 300 compositions), it is the last named, indeed, the third movement of that piece, which has almost single handedly kept Raff's name alive since his death in 1882.

At the height of his career, Joachim Raff was one of the most widely performed and respected composers of his day. That his life and work fell into total eclipse within a generation after his passing is a remarkable, indeed almost unbelievable statement in and of itself. Curiously, for almost a century, the sole composition to have survived this absolute collapse and eradication, the Cavatina movement of his Opus 85, has itself been the object of every conceivable kind of transcription and arrangement. An earlier measure of the popularity of this movement can be shown by the fact that the piece was known to have been in the repertoire of the Piano Quintet that performed on the ill-fated maiden voyage of the R.M.S. Titanic (before it, the Titanic, that is, sank in April, 1912)! However, it is the first and most important of these transcriptions that forms the basis of the text of the present volume which replicates Fr. Kistner's first edition of Edmund Singer's orchestral arrangement.

The Cavatina is the third of a set of brief, compactly written duos for violin and piano that Raff composed under the collective title Six Morceaux. The titles of the six movements, Marcia, Pastorale, Cavatina, Scherzino, Canzona, Tarantella, all Italianate forms (even if the music is squarely mainstream mid-century German) suggests, perhaps, that Raff was aiming both for as broad an audience as well as wide a range of performance opportunities as possible. All of the pieces, however, are excellent examples of Raff's art in miniature. They display Raff's predilection for concise thematic exposition, careful but colorful harmonization along with concurrent, extensive development, even within the confines of performance times that average four minutes apiece.

The set was composed in Wiesbaden in 1859, and dedicated to Louis (Ludwig) Strauss, a leading violin virtuoso of the time. The score was first issued by Kistner (in Leipzig) in January, 1862.

Edmund Singer, who prepared the orchestral version of the Cavatina, was another well known violinist of the period. Singer was konzertmeister of Liszt's Weimar orchestra in 1854 when Raff was acting as Liszt's factotum (1850-1855). He was also the dedicatee of Raff's Konzertstück for violin and orchestra “La Fée d'amour,” Opus 67 (1854), and, as such, would have been intimately familiar both with Raff's idiom in general as well as with his approach to the violin in particular.

The D-major cavatina is simplicity itself. At seventy-two measures in length, there is hardly time or space for much more than a statement of a melody, its slight but clear development along with a modified recapitulation. Within this restricted venue, Singer takes Raff's very straightforward composition and adds to it the barest minimum of orchestral substance and color. The result, in

this case, is a virtual miniature concerto movement. The original piece consists of little more than the violin's melody accompanied by the simplest of harmonic support. The central developmental episode tends to wander somewhat away from the primary key of D major, but not by very much at all. Indeed, the tessitura of the accompaniment (in both Raff's original and Singer's fairly literal transcription) hardly ever rises above that of the violin, and largely stays below the first octave above middle-C. As if to emphasize this by keeping the orchestral color fairly neutral, Singer's orchestra consists of 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, timpani and strings.

While orchestral strings pluck their arpeggiated accompanimental figures, the winds provide the equivalent of the original piano's sostenuto pedal – thus leaving the solo violin with a wide open field in which to display its sentimental melody. Later, as the strings make a convenient switch to arco, occasional tremolandi along with supporting rumbles from the timpani and thickened woodwind textures, help to increase the tension thereby bringing the piece to its very telescoped climax. In the end, it is the violin on its low D, with a soft, sustained D major chord in the winds framed by discrete pizzicato strings that brings the piece to a quiet conclusion.

Dr. Avrohom Leichtling , 2004

With thanks to Mark Thomas for supplementary material

Performance material: Kistner und Siegel, Köln