

Six Sonatas for Cello by J.S.Bach  
arranged for the Pianoforte by  
JOACHIM RAFF

WoO.31

Sonata No.1 in G major  
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Joachim Raff's interest in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach and the inspiration he drew from them is unmatched by any of the other major composers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One could speculate that Raff's partiality for polyphonic writing originates from his studies of Bach's works - the identification of "influenced by Bach" with "Polyphony" is a popular idea but is often questionable in terms of scientific correctness. Raff wrote numerous original compositions in polyphonic style and used musical forms of the baroque period. However, he also created a relatively large number of arrangements and transcriptions of works by Bach. Obviously, Bach's music exerted a strong attraction on Raff that went further than plain admiration. Looking at Raff's arrangements one can easily detect his particular interest in those works by Bach that could be supplemented by another composer. Upon these models Raff could fit his reverence for the musical past as well as exploit his never tiring interest in the technical aspects of the art of composition.

One of the few statements we have by Raff about the basics of his art reveal his concept of how to attach supplements to works by Bach. Raff wrote about his orchestral arrangement of Bach's *Ciaconna* in d minor for solo violin: "Everybody who has studied J.S. Bach's compositions for solo violin more closely knows that they are rich in polyphony. It could even be assumed that for the greater part they were not conceived for the solo violin originally ... There is no doubt that this is the case with the *Ciaconna*; the piece contains numerous rudiments and mutilations that are easily noticeable, giving way to the assumption that the piece must have existed in a different version previously of which the current version is only an arrangement. The present arrangement is an attempt to recover the polyphonic contents of this lost version of the *Ciaconna* and to adapt it to the modern orchestra. It proclaims no other merit than being the first attempt of this kind."

It is Raff's intention to fill in these gaps with material that fits in seamlessly with the style of the original source. It is more like a trip into the world of Bach than a transformation of Bach's musical material into Raff's own world. His piano arrangements of Bach's suites for solo cello are even closer stylistically to Bach's original than this is the case with the *Ciaconna*. Raff hardly 'modernizes' the original music in the sense of his own romantic period, he transfers it to a modern instrument and only occasionally uses contemporary playing techniques. In contrast to Bach arrangements by Liszt or Busoni, Raff does not write a virtuoso-type piano music using the achievements of harmony of his time but stays more or less within the limits of Bach's own means of composition. The arrangements are

less technically demanding than most of his original compositions for piano. The result is not truly pure in style, but it fits in very well with the original and treats it respectfully even if additions are to be made in the process of transferring a work from the cello to the piano. Raff starts off with considerable imagination and integrates the single part source, depending on its character, into his multi part arrangements using different techniques.

### **Sonata No.1 in G major**

In case the original consists mainly of sequences of broken chords Raff uses them as an accompaniment for an attractive tune invented by him. For an example, see the *Prélude* from the first suite. It looks as if Raff attempted to reconstruct the melody that got lost and detached from its remaining accompaniment. The same method was used by Charles Gounod in his *Ave Maria*, however, Raff avoids sentimentality and achieves a more homogeneous integration of the original and the supplement. In case Raff considers the original to be a tune that could stand on its own he adds an accompaniment that heightens the original's expressiveness but does not distract from it. Polyphonic rudiments of the cello part are fully expanded. Here, Raff takes advantage of the far better conditions for polyphonic playing on the piano. In general, he treats the notes of the source with high respect and uses them almost without any change. There are only a few alterations that Raff applies for the sake of fitting the material to another instrument. For instance, he changes the rhythm of *Gigue* of the first suite by tying together notes that have the same pitch. Thus he avoids successions of repetitive notes which are sometimes problematic when played on the piano. But he achieves even more; the result is less stiff and more vivid and sparkling than the original cello version.

### **Sonata No.2 in D minor**

Almost everywhere in his transcription of Bach's second cello suite, Raff gives the original melody to the right hand. In the *Prelude* the left hand imitates motives from the right, usually at a distance of a single beat. There are numerous dissonances which underscore tones of tragedy and pathos in the character of the piece. The left hand accompaniment of the *Allemande* begins with simple arpeggios but develops to a true counterpoint during the course of the piece. In the *Courante* the left hand accompaniment consists mainly of broken chords. However, Raff somewhat remedies the monotony of the original's uninterrupted semi-quavers by introducing phrases made up of three quavers in the accompaniment. In contrast to the two-part *Courante*, Raff expands the *Sarabande* to a four-part piece and gives it a choral-like character. As before, Raff keeps the original notes of the two *Minuets* in the player's right hand. He adds to the existing hints at harmony but keeps what is already there. In the second *Minuet* he occasionally changes the plain sequences of quavers of the original and replaces them with variations of the main motive of this piece. The *Gigue* is again written in two parts. Exceptional in this suite is when Raff passes the original melody to the left hand in measures 49 through 56 and adds a counter-melody to be played by the right hand. The counter-melody is an expansion of Bach's original which consists of just two notes. In measures 69 through 71 Raff uses the note e in place of the original e-flat, fitting the melody to the added harmony. It cannot be proven whether Raff supplied this change intentionally or whether the edition on which his transcription is based already contained this alteration.

### **Sonata No.3 in C major**

Because of a second voice added by Raff to its beginning, the *Prelude* takes on the form of a two part invention. As a result, the two hands alternate in the playing of original material. From measure 37 onward the accompaniment changes from a single line to that of chordal syncopation, which lends the passage an almost "swing" character. The playful

melody of the *Allemande* is maintained by Raff in the right hand while the left hand engages in a complex accompaniment, partially chordal, partially polyphonic. One could almost speak of a perfect stylistic copy of baroque idiom, were it not for the occasional arpeggios and low notes which alert us that this version was composed 140 years after Bach. In the *Courante* which follows, Raff avoids the monotony of continual eighth note motion by distributing the source material in both voices of his arrangement and thereby giving his original contribution a clearly different rhythmic profile. The piano version of the *Sarabande* remains quite close to the partly four voiced original. Any compromises in execution and any harmonic spaces which are a result, are obviously not in the completely four voice piano version. Characteristic of the accompaniment for the two *Bourrées* are the numerous stepwise rising and falling bass lines, by which Raff underscores the sequential ideal of the original. In the concluding *Gigue* the original offers little room for expansion. Raff works to stagger effects, inasmuch as he introduces small gestures which enhance expression, for example in the surprising exchange of original material from the right hand to the left in measure 11, or the added Sixths of the right hand in measure 41, which lend the passage additional melodic charm.

#### **Sonata No.4 in E flat major**

In the *Prelude* of the 4<sup>th</sup> Suite Raff invents a melody for the right hand by way of the chordal voicing of the original - somewhat similar to what happens in the first movement of the 1<sup>st</sup> Suite - though this time somewhat less obtrusively and more restrained. In a few places Raff does change the bass line of the original to accommodate better harmonization of his original melodic contribution. To what degree this maneuver is influenced by his choice of sources has not yet been examined. With its addition of Sixths and some piquant Seconds the harmony affects a Romantic fullness. Most of the original Bach melody remains in the left hand (mm 76 onward), until at the climax of the movement it is switched to the descant. In Raff's arrangement of this suite the *Allemande* becomes a two part invention, in which the material of the original is to be found mainly in the right hand (though not always!). The result is stylistically pure baroque without Romantic incursions. In the *Courante* the left hand takes up the accompaniment and by way of the added Thirds and Sixths there acquires a certain depth as well as weight, which are not characteristic of the light footed original. The polyphony intimated in the *Sarabande* by Bach's arpeggios is adapted by Raff to form a movement in four voices, which also lends the piece something of the atmosphere of a chorale. A similar impression is evoked by Raff in the *Bouree II*, though in the *Bouree I* Raff is careful to preserve the playful nature of the music in his enrichment of the accompaniment. The *Gigue* is also two voiced, in which Raff strengthens the dance like impression of the movement with rhythmic accents in the accompaniment.

#### **Sonata No.5 in C minor**

In the *Prelude* Raff expands chords occasionally indicated by Bach to a full four voices and lets the motivic material of the original wander through his chord voicing. Special emphasis is given to the pedal point on C (and later on G), which Raff lets resound in the lowest register of the keyboard, and Raff does not neglect an opportunity for expanding the section in 3/8, which begins with a fugal theme and continues as a single line, to a three voice fugue. Here also one finds the original thematic material of Bach always being distributed among various lines, to which is added Raff's counterpoint in other voices. The reprises in the fugue theme are utilized by Raff to engender the general increase in volume. In the *Allemande* as well, Raff transfers Bach's patterns from one hand to the other in his piano score, while the four voice harmony remains closely within the boundaries of the prescribed tonality of C minor. It is different in the *Courante*, where Raff always leaves the melody in the descant and steers the harmonies of the accompanying

voices into somewhat unusual realms (look around measure 22 for example). Even more daring harmonic maneuvers are introduced in the *Sarabande*, where a present day listener might believe that he has encountered the Blues in measures 15-16. The short appoggiaturas, upon which Raff anchors the theme of *Gavotte 1* are his own additions, as are the two sforzato chords in the unusual sequence of F minor, D minor, with which he interrupts the even flowing triplets in *Gavotte 2*. In the concluding *Gigue* he expands the original melody in the right hand with two voices in the left, and by such skillful application of these half tone sequences of the original, Raff adds a new dimension of harmonic color.

### **Sonata No. 6 in D major**

In the *Prelude* Raff accommodates the even flow of the triplet motion in the original by giving it to the right hand and adds single voice accompaniment for long stretches in the bass. This begins with regularly accented arpeggiations but generates a somewhat more personal rhythmic presence which counteracts any monotony in the motion of the triplets and highlights the potential developmental motives in the original with harmonies in thirds and sixths. The melody of the *Allemande*, with its twists and turns, exhibits numerous arabesque touches and Raff retains this in the right hand exclusively while the left hand delivers a complex, partially chordal, partially polyphonic accompaniment. In his harmony Raff every now and then allows himself an occasional excursion into the tonal language of his time, for example, the application of a minor mode chord in the subdominant of the concluding measure. In the following *Courante* Raff's accompaniment in relation to Bach's pregnant motives remains quite restrained, though occasionally the chromatic motion of the bass in the cadences of the two formal parts makes one prick up one's ears. The piano version of the *Sarabande* holds closely to the implications of a four voice original. Naturally there are no compromises of playing technique in the piano version which can cause empty harmonic spaces as in the original. In both the *Gavottes* Raff's reworking is limited to an expansion of the already implied chords of a four voice setting. In the concluding *Gigue* Raff uses his limited space for broadenings suggested by the original, inasmuch as he applies limited means to increase the effect of the music, for example the individual harmonization of measure 6, or the long held trill in the right hand after measure 17.

Raff created his arrangements in 1868 in Wiesbaden. They were published in two volumes in 1869 and 1871 by the Leipzig firm Rieter-Biedermann. With some certainty he used as a source the edition of Bach's cello suites by Justus Johann Friederich Dotzauer that were published in 1826 by Breitkopf und Härtel. Here we find the Suites titled as Sonatas which is the same term that Raff also used. Apparently, he was not the only composer who arranged Bach's Cello Suites. The New Edition of Bach's Works (*Neue Bachausgabe*) lists arrangements by Robert Schumann, W. Stade, and Carl P. Graedener. However, these have been written for cello with piano accompaniment. Arrangements for solo piano, including Raff's work, are ignored in the Bach edition.

Raff's arrangements of Bach's suites for solo cello are rich in musical inventiveness and accomplished in style

Volker Tosta, Stuttgart, November 1995 - Oktober 2003