

Suite No.1 in A minor for Piano Op.69

By Alan H. Krueck

This short description was written by Dr Krueck for one of a series of four CDs issued by his AK Coburg label in 2003 and 2004. The CDs contained all seven of Raff's Piano Suites and his arrangement for piano of J.S. Bach's six Suites for solo Piano, all played by Alexander Zolotarev.

1. *Preludio*
2. *Mazurka*
3. *Toccatina*
4. *Aria*
5. *Fuga*

From the standpoint of origin, the suites for piano Opp. 69, 71 and 72 by Joachim Raff form a loosely related group both historically and stylistically and, as such, set themselves off from others in the genre. The *Suite de Morceaux pour petites mains*, Op. 75 stands apart from other suites by absence of historical dances and the use of titles typical of the salon.

The Suite, Op. 69 did not find any particular public response, although it probably deserves to be acknowledged as the most appealing in its group. Raff convincingly combines traditional and more contemporary dance types without taking refuge in 18th century mannerisms. The ear is immediately captivated by the opening *Preludio*. To be sure, the melodic configurations have Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* [Songs without Words] as their reference point, but the distance is as comparable for Mendelssohn and Raff as that exhibited by Schumann's Chopin portraiture in *Carnaval*. Indeed, Raff's strongly expressive use of the seventh exudes a bit of Schumann's poetry. The same is true of the transition to the *Mazurka*, the most contemporary of the dances in the suite. Raff succumbs here, though superficially and in only a few measures, to a *Mazurka* accentuation drawn from Chopin. Every now and then he lets his motifs wander, even touching the realm of D-flat major, a key which becomes increasingly important in the course of the piece. Above all, he returns to A minor for the beginning of the *Toccatina*, which again relies heavily on Mendelssohn patterns. This home tonality of the suite and that of D-flat major share a relationship based on whole tone thirds, though they have little in common regarding their leading tones. For this reason Raff places a modulation from A minor at the beginning of the *Aria* to the targeted tonality of D-flat major before elaborating what is emphatic song. Interestingly enough the prepared modulation is recalled later, since A minor is traversed anew just before the *Aria* theme returns. In the concluding *Fugue* proceedings are reversed. A unison succession of notes outlining the D-flat major scale and converging on the common tone C, cadences into A minor after a general pause and the *Fugue* takes its course.