

FRANZ XAVER SCHARWENKA

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Here is another neglected composer with many fine piano works to his credit.

He was a German composer, teacher and a first class pianist. He was born in Sumter, Prussia which, in 1919, became part of Poland. Scharwenka became fascinated with the history and culture of Poland and became a splendid interpreter of the music of Chopin. Chopin had died a year before Scharwenka was born.

Franz Xaver was born on 6 January 1850 and, as a boy of three, was drawn to the piano but did not have serious studies until he was fifteen when he was living with his family in Berlin. In the Akademie de Tonkunst, he studied with Theodor Kullak (1818-1882) who composed much piano music himself plus an engaging Piano Concerto in C minor and a Piano Trio.

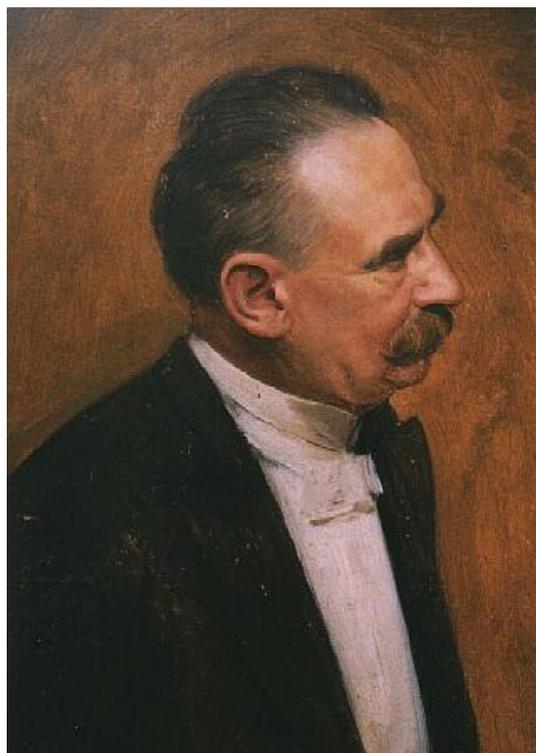
Scharwenka's debut was at the Singakademie in 1869. He went into military service in 1873 and was discharged the following year. By now, he had composed a Piano Trio in F sharp minor Op 1 of 1868, a Violin Sonata in D minor Op 2, Polish Dances for piano Op 3 of 1896, a splendid and engaging Scherzo in G for piano Op 4, which was not published until 1905, Stories at the Piano Op 5, sometimes called Two Legends which, in the second piece, has some irritating Schubertian vamping and the Piano Sonata no 1 in C sharp minor Op 6 dedicated to Kullak.

The Sonata has much to commend it yet has many weaknesses. It has some feeble themes and other clichés of Chopin including serious grammatical errors as confirmed by many concert pianists. The work opens with an F double sharp whereas G natural is the obvious correct usage. There are passages in sharp keys with some many flats that the composer should have changed the key signature. This absurdity also pervades many of Chopin's works. It is a mark of a poor composer, or a composer ignorant of both technique and grammar as confirmed by senior music professionals.

The opening movement is given as *allegro appassionato*. The two themes are both Chopinesque and therefore somewhat weak but when the themes appear in the left hand with cascades above, the composer's skill is shown. There are a few modulations. The scherzo is *vivacissimo* and is playful but rather trite. The adagio is in five flats with a lot of unnecessary accidentals where a key change would be easier. This leads directly into the finale *allegro molto agitato*.

In 1876, he composed his finest work, the Piano Concerto no 1 in B flat minor Op 32. This is a magnificent achievement even by the highest standards. It is original and the Chopin influence is gone. This is a masculine work containing contrasting and memorable themes. It has moments of appealing lyricism and stunning pianism. It is a therapeutic work having a 100% feel good factor. The second movement is a scherzo and is an absolute winner, far more than merely attractive but disarmingly beautiful in its own way. It is a joy to play, if you can play it, and a joy to hear. It has been said that that it is the finest movement of its kind in any music literature. The third movement opens with power but it is a slow movement of extraordinary content while the finale is a real finale.

It may be as good as Rachmaninov although it does not have the lush romanticism and integral



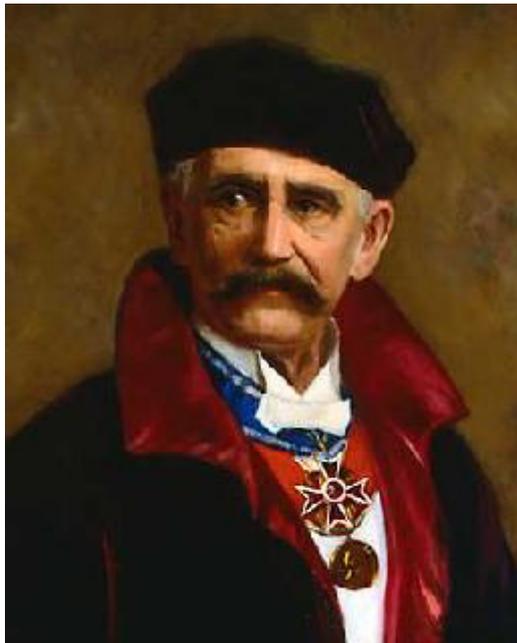
melancholy that Rachmaninov brings to his superlative scores but, my goodness, this Scharwenka is really good and structurally finer than Tchaikovsky's Concerto no 1, also in B flat minor, and the piano part lies better in Scharwenka's hands. But readers must not take these comments as being dismissive of Tchaikovsky.

This concerto was followed by his Cello Sonata of 1877.

The Piano Concerto no 2 Op 56 dates from 1888, a fruitful period for him with the completion of both his Piano Trio no 2 and the Piano Sonata no 2. The Piano Concerto no 2 is an attractive work but does not have the depth of the superlative first concerto and has too many clichés of filigree cascades and arpeggios and the obvious hints of Chopin have returned.

The Piano Sonata no 2 in E flat is an exemplary example of piano writing. It is a confident, sunny piece with excellent themes and superb construction, exquisitely written for the piano and a real delight

In 1881 Scharwenka founded his own Music School which quickly became successful. He was the director from 1881 to 1882. The next director was Klindworth (1883-1892) followed by Philipp (1893-1917) and Xaver again until 1928. This music school became known as the Klindworth-Scharwenka School.



Scharwenka took up conducting and gave a series of concerts of music by Beethoven, Berlioz and Liszt in 1886. He worked with the conductor Hans Richter and the violinist Joseph Joachim and was active as a pianist, teacher and educationalist.

Scharwenka wrote one symphony set in C minor Op 60, written in 1885. It is not an outstanding work by any means but worthy to be heard.

The Piano Concerto no 3 Op 80 dates from 1889 and is good in parts. In the main, it is a strong work but there are lapses into a pervading weakness of an effeminacy and other weakness. The slow movement is very attractive but it could be said that each movement is a little too long and the whole work at approximately 40 minutes does slightly outstay its welcome. The final is often somewhat lightweight.

I asked two famous concert pianists about Scharwenka and they both said the same thing. His concertos are not as fine as those by Rachmaninov or Glazunov and Tchaikovsky's concertos are better known. But Scharwenka's concertos are vastly better than Chopin, Medtner and Scriabin.

In 1891, Scharwenka made his first trip to the USA and emigrated there opening the Scharwenka School of Music there in 1893.

His recital tours included music by Beethoven, Chopin Mendelssohn, Weber and Liszt. He recorded some items on piano rolls which, I understand, are available today on CDs.

In 1896 his only opera Mataswintha was completed.

In 1907, his Piano Method was published in Leipzig. The following year saw the appearance of his Piano Concerto no 4 Op 82. After the first concerto this is his best concerto with the good qualities of

its illustrious predecessor. It has much to commend it but, again, may be a little too long to sustain its material. There are some rhapsodic moments which hinder continuity.

In 1917, his brother Ludwig Philipp died. He had been born in 1847 and was also a composer and teacher. He was admired by Reger and taught Otto Klemperer and composed much piano music including three sonatas as well as a Violin Concerto, two string quartets, a piano trio and sonatas for violin, viola and cello respectively.

Xaver composed much solo piano music including attractive sets of Polish dances and Variations on a theme of C H op 57. C H was Prince Constantin zu Hohenloche which work consists of a theme and thirteen variations. There are also sets of waltzes and I cannot understand composers and pianists fascination with waltzes since the predictable 3/4 time becomes both tedious and limiting.

Franz Xaver Scharwenka died in Berlin on 8 December 1924.

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