

Note on our journey with Franz Xaver Scharwenka and Beethoven

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In July 2015, the Director of the August City Music Festival at St Lawrence Jewry contacted me in distress. The pianist due to open the Festival at the beginning of August had just withdrawn from the engagement. He was to play the solo Liszt transcription of Beethoven's 9th symphony. During the conversation, I remembered that somewhere among my music, I had a copy of the nine symphonies by Beethoven, transcribed by Franz Xaver Scharwenka.

Scharwenka was born near Posen, East Prussia, and died in Berlin in 1924. Although he began learning to play when he was three, he did not start formal music studies until he was 15, when his family moved to Berlin where he enrolled at the *Akademie der Tonkunst*. He travelled widely as a piano virtuoso and scored considerable success in England in both this capacity and that of composer. He was an exceedingly fine pianist, highly praised for his beauty of tone, and was renowned for his brilliant interpretation of the music of Frederic Chopin. In addition, he was an inspiring teacher. He composed symphonies, piano concerti and an opera (performed at the Met, New York), as well as a quantity of instrumental music, including the transcriptions for piano duet for four hands of the nine symphonies by Beethoven.

This was the music I found in my collection which had belonged to my mother, Helga Bassel, a student of Leonid Kreutzer at the *Hochschule für Musik* in Berlin. My mother first came across these duets and she played them with her fiancé, a geologist by profession, but also a fine musician. This was in the 1920s, shortly after Scharwenka had retired from the international concert platform and his teaching career in Berlin, and shortly after his death in 1924.



Helga Bassel and Franz Michels, Berlin 1927

Reverting to London in 2015 ... I was able to inform the director that I had located the music of the Beethoven/Scharwenka Symphonies transcribed for piano duo. I immediately contacted Ben Schoeman, brilliant South African-born pianist and international prize winner. We had met in 2008 at the Royal Overseas League in London. Ben was the Gold Medal winner of the ROSL Music Competition in 2009, which I won decades earlier. We were invited to give our first concert together in 2010 and have continued to give recitals together ever since. Ben agreed enthusiastically to join forces for the 9th Symphony and in a matter of days we prepared this massive opus. We performed it in its entirety for the first time at the opening festival concert to a hugely appreciative audience.

Working on this Symphony and subsequently on all nine in this form, has been a journey of exploration and inspiration. To be able to hear and discover the intricate weaving of all the internal harmonies and melodic lines that one knows are there, but that tend to get submerged in large orchestral ensemble, was indeed a revelation.

Ever since that performance in 2015, we have steadily worked through all the nine symphonies, performing them at music societies and festivals. Audiences have been extremely enthusiastic and appreciative of this genre.

In an age when CDs, iPods, Spotify and YouTube were unknown, and live concerts a prerogative of the wealthy, these transcriptions reflected what most people in the 19th Century knew of these works and indeed, of countless other masterpieces.

The nine symphonies transcribed by Scharwenka are part of the piano repertoire which deserve a hearing to be shared by all. The music is no longer in print, but in the hands of two pianists, the genius of Scharwenka's transcriptions together with the power of Beethoven can ensure the legacy lives on.

Tessa Uys and Ben Schoeman, London 2019

