

Le Salon de Musiques - January 13th, 2013

A stunning USA premier: P. Scharwenka's Piano Quintet a re-discovered masterwork

Not many in the USA can say that they've heard of the romantic 19th century music of German composer, Phillip Scharwenka. Scharwenka, (1847 -1917) wrote an enormous amount of chamber music, that is on par with the great German composers of his day. But for the most part, his music has been largely forgotten.

However, this past Sunday, Jan. 13, 2013 at 4 pm, at the 5th floor of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Le Salon de Musiques, now in their 3rd season in Los Angeles, gave a stunning USA premier of Phillip Scharwenka's Piano Quintet in B Minor, Op. 118, revealing a composer of great worth.

Scharwenka's musical works and in particular this piece, were re-discovered by the founder and director of Le Salon de Musiques, French pianist, Francois Chouchan. Chouchan spent two years researching this composer, and personally located the only existing score of this piece, along with the assistance and support the German Consulate of Los Angeles.

The opening remarks given by Julius Reder Carlson, musicologist and master of ceremonies of Le Salon de Musiques, focused on the lives of brothers Phillip Scharwenka and Xavier (who established the noted Scharwenka Music Conservatory in Berlin) and offered theories as to why Phillip's music has been neglected.

The Sunday afternoon concert began with two works for Piano and Cello, starting with J.S. Bach's Sonata in D Major, for Cello and Piano in 4 movements, and Schumann's Fantasiestucke, for Cello and Piano, Op. 73, in 3 movements.

Antonio Lysy, internationally celebrated cellist and teacher at UCLA, performed with impeccable elegance and total commitment. Partnered with equal grace on the piano by Steven Vanhauwaert, both artists created a mood, enunciating the austere and spiritual essence of Bach's work, before changing over to the robust and romantic style of the Schumann piece.

The capacity filled audience (tripled in size from last month) then prepared for the USA premier of Scharwenka's Piano Quintet in B minor. Francois Chouchan brought together a first-rate ensemble for this work, consisting of international and nationally recognized musicians: Gullaume Sutre, 1st violin, Searmi Park, 2nd violin, Helen S. Callus, viola, along with Antonio Lysa, cello, with Steven Vanhauwaert on Piano. These great artists gave an impassioned, committed and flawless performance of Scharwenka's gorgeous music.

Written towards the end of Scharwenka's life in 1910, his Piano Quintet evokes the great music of Brahms, Schumann, Cesar Frank, and Beethoven. Though a traditional 19th century composer, Scharwenka dispensed of the usual four movements, employing only three movements to express several contrasting themes and ideas.

The piano's role was mainly supportive, with some beautiful solo moments in the Adagio of the 2nd movement, played with consummate musicianship by pianist, Steven Vanhauwart. The thematic materials and melodies primarily stayed with the first violin.

From France, guest violinist, Gullaume Sutre (1st violin) took charge from the opening down beat. With his sweet, yet thrilling tones and phrasing, he directed the flow of the music with effortless passion. The

plangent cello-like sound of the violist, Helen S. Callus combined with the cello playing of Antonio Lysy, provided a rich tonal balance for the ensemble.

Chouchan hopes to change Phillip Scharwenka's neglected status, and judging from the response of the audience, who gave a rousing standing ovation at the conclusion of the performance, this remarkable composer's music won't remain hidden for much longer.

After the music, Le Salon de Musiques continued with a lively question and answer period between audience and performers, as French champagne was served. The afternoon concluded with a gourmet buffet of light refreshments prepared by the Patina restaurant of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

On February 10, Le Salon de Musiques performs another USA premiere, of music by the 19th century composer, Zarebsky.

For more information on the remaining concerts: www.leSalondeMusiques.com

- Ahdda Shur, Examiner.com

Bach, Schumann and Scharwenka at Le Salon de Musiques

An entire century. Actually, it's been 101 years and some months if we want to be specific. That's how long it took for US audiences to hear the magisterial Piano Quintet in B minor, Op. 118 by German composer Philipp Scharwenka.

Through no fault of the music, I should add.

Scharwenka, one half of the fraternal duo that dominated German musical pedagogy at the turn of the 20th century (his younger brother was Xaver, whose piano concertos retain a tenuous toehold on the fringes of the concerto repertoire), was one of the unfortunate victims of a tumultuous century and its equally tumultuous musical history. With Germany defeated in the First World War, its economy and collective sense of self shattered, the survivors and youth of the era were quick and unforgiving in their willingness to cast away the old for the promise of the new. Whatever artifacts and ideals that carried even the faintest residue of the old century that lay in ruins was eagerly, even giddily, consigned to oblivion – and that included the Scharwenka brothers' music.

Never mind all that. The music arrived to the New World last Sunday, a little late, but all the more welcome for it.

The performance was part of the 2012–13 season of Le Salon de Musiques, a chamber music group that finds its home on the highest floor of the gold-spangled hallways of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. François Chouchan, the organization's founder and artistic director, has made it his mission to exhume musical works that lie forgotten under the gathering dust of time and neglect. His journey to bring Scharwenka's work to listeners in Southern California cost him great effort, not to mention the assistance of the German Consulate of Los Angeles. A single copy of the score was eventually procured, which was

quickly copied out, reprinted, then sent to Los Angeles.

What would Scharwenka have thought about his music finally being heard on the American continent; in 21st-century Los Angeles no less, a time and place far removed from the composer's Wilhelminian-era Berlin? The thought, I'd like to imagine, would have faded away into insignificance. Scharwenka would probably be too busy keeping his head from spinning in delight over the superb polish, technique, and expressive nuance of the Salon de Musiques musicians.

Had you never been told that this was a US première, you would likely have thought that the Piano Quintet was an old friend of these musicians. I'm not sure how much time the musicians had to live with the Scharwenka. It doesn't really matter. The players – Guillaume Sutre (first violin), Searmi Park (second violin), Helen S. Callus (viola), Antonio Lysy (cello) and Steven Vanhauwaert (piano) – utterly conquered this rich score. The playfulness at certain points, the exhilarating sense of risk – all of these were hallmarks of musicians for whom the score had ceased to be merely notes to be memorized, and had become flesh of their flesh.

True, the score isn't without its imperfections. The outer movements were well padded with the pomp and bluster that characterizes a lot of the music from the German Empire's zenith. (Take most of the work of Hans Pfitzner – please.) But like a pearl ensconced in the protective embrace of two dusky clamshells sat the work's gorgeous middle movement, marked “Adagio con intimo sentimento” – reason enough for the work to endure today and always.

Anything following this performance would have been an anticlimax. Le Salon de Musiques wisely placed the accompanying works, J.S. Bach's Gamba Sonata in D, BWV 1028 and the cello arrangement of Robert Schumann's Fantasy Pieces, Op. 73, before the Scharwenka. The elegant restraint of Lysy and Vanhauwaert only served to whet the appetite for the Scharwenka that loomed at the program's end. But they were fine performances in their own right.

After the recital, Lysy explained that his playing of the Bach adhered to conjectured theories of Baroque period performance. Perhaps. But there was also something capital-R Romantic about their playing that belied the cellist's remark. The burnished tone and warmth they projected gently echoed Wilhelm Furtwängler's remark about Bach being the “greatest Romantic composer”.

Their Schumann was very fine, too.

Though the wait for Scharwenka was just a little over a hundred years, the chamber music fan, fortunately, doesn't have to wait as long for the next Le Salon de Musiques concert. It's less than a month away on 10 February. But you'll forgive me, I hope, when I tell you that waiting around a few weeks for my next Le Salon de Musiques fix can sometimes feel like waiting for a hundred years.

-Ted Ayala, bachtrack.com