

Brahms on the Baltic: A Romance and a Dedication

Birth Centennials of Xaver Scharwenka and George Henschel Recall a Summer's Idyl

By Bertha Zobel

(As told to Walter Pels)

IT is more than seventy years since Xaver Scharwenka composed his Romanzero, op. 33, and dedicated it to Johannes Brahms. A dedication always interests me by reason of the story it may reveal. But it was not until recently that I learned the facts behind this work and its inscription to Brahms.

My late father was a cousin of George Henschel, who was for a time the conductor of the Boston Symphony as well as a well known lieder singer. It was Henschel who introduced Brahms and

moving vans brought to the Berlin railway station the thirty-six trunks and their contents which the ladies thought necessary. A piano also went along.

Sasznitz at the time was a small fishing village with straw-thatched houses. As our party was rather large, we reserved in advance the entire house belonging to a fisherman named Hahlbeck. Those in the party included Mme. Gousseff, her daughter and her son; the tutor of the latter, Mr. Feiertag, a student of theology; Mlle. Lenoir, the French companion of the family; Minna, the cook; Amanda, the chamber maid; and of course myself. Thus, we were, altogether, eight.

At Greifswald the thirty-six trunks and the piano had to be transported from the railway station to a ship. This was eventually accomplished, but the departure of the steamer was delayed by an hour. At the landing-place, Lauterbach, the same delay occurred. Then there followed a five-hour trip in carriages at almost a snail's tempo.

A Seaside Acquaintance

Towards midnight we arrived at Sasznitz. The caravan of three trucks and two landaus was relieved of its contents. It was nearly sunrise on the following day before we could retire.

A couple of hours of refreshing sleep, however, brought us back to normalcy, and a breakfast of fried flounder made us forget our fatigue completely.

I took my first sea bath at six o'clock the same morning. . . .

After leaving the bathhouse I met George Henschel, at that time at the zenith of his singing career. His first question—after an exchange of greetings—was: "Have you met Brahms? No? Well, then, you must come to the Hotel Fahrenberg tonight. You will find both of us on the verandah. *Addio* and *au revoir!*" I left him, exhilarated and filled with expectancy.

Encounter in the Forest

Having rested, I took my morning walk in the glorious Buchenwald (forest of beeches), where there were mingled the whispering of the woods and the distant roaring of the sea.

I was wandering, lost in thought, along a half-concealed, narrow footpath in a dark pine thicket when I noticed, coming toward me at a little distance, an individual of medium height, short-set and beardless. He wore a jacket of impossible style and indefinite color—the predominant motive was a dull, reddish brown with a small check. His trousers were wide and too short, and he carried his hat in his hand.

The lonely wanderer passed me silently. After a few steps I turned; so did the brown-checked personage, and we looked for a moment into each other's eyes.

During the entire day the meeting with that apparition troubled my mind. Towards evening I strolled over to the Hotel Fahrenberg. Henschel met me according to our appointment, and led me up to—the brown-checked, gentleman.

Good Lord, what a surprise! It was Brahms.

Immediately we conversed like old acquaintances, as he too recalled our meeting in the forest. Upon his asking whether I was an early riser, and my affirmative answer, Brahms invited me to go with him the next morning at 3 a.m. on a flounder-fishing trip. Naturally I was delighted.

During our talk Henschel, with his clever fingers, had been drawing all kinds of amusing sketches on the back of the bill-of-fare, and caused great fun, especially with the amusing caricatures of well-known personalities. Among these, the happy, smiling Maestro of Weimar, Franz Liszt, seemed very well portrayed.

I begged for the card with this *pièce de résistance*, as I wanted to add it to my collection.

Franz Liszt nach einer Skizze von Georg Henschel.

Das auf eine Briefmarke gezeichnete, befindet sich im Besitz von Xaver Scharwenka.



Du warst nicht nur Wagnerianer,
Du warst fürwahr auch „selber Yaner“.
Jupiter tpmans den Ramönon,
Jupiter amans bei den Schönen,
Im Reich der Lieb', im Reich der Geister,
Im Reich der Töne — üb'raß Meister;
Und was sich heut als „Meister“ brüestet,
Hat den Franz Liszt nicht „überlätzet!“

FRANZ LISZT after a sketch and verse by George Henschel on the back of a menu card which he gave to Xaver Scharwenka. A free translation is as follows:

"Not only were you a Wagnerite,
But also, truly a musical 'light.'
For the Muses you were a Jupiter of tone,
And a Jupiter of love for every fair one.
In the kingdom of noble spirits, and of love,
And in the realm of music, you were far above
All those who term themselves 'master' today—
Franz Liszt heads the list and none can gainsay."

A Rude Awakening

On the way home I went with Brahms past the small cottage in which I occupied an attic room. He wished to call for me in the morning. I was to expect him there before the entrance to the house. By the time we parted it was 11 p.m. He disappeared in the darkness toward Krampas while Henschel returned to his hotel. Tired from the trip and lulled by the effect of many glasses of Pilsener, I fell immediately into a deep sleep.



TITLE PAGE of Xaver Scharwenka's Romanzero, for piano, dedicated to Brahms.

Scharwenka and brought about the happy acquaintance which resulted in the dedication. It was while sorting some of my father's papers lately that I came across a letter from Henschel, enclosing a newspaper clipping in which Scharwenka tells the story.

As 1950 marks the centenary of both Xaver Scharwenka (b. Jan. 6) and Henschel (b. Feb. 18), it is particularly appropriate to republish the little article. It may be freely translated as follows:

Brahms in Shirtsleeves

It was the year 1877 [Scharwenka is now the narrator]. Summer was approaching, and with it the usual question where to spend it. Mme. Gousseff, a Russian, who had taken up her abode in Western Berlin, and whose charming daughter Zenaida was one of my pupils, invited me to join the family in their summer sojourn. She asked my advice when and where to go. I suggested Sasznitz on island of Ruegen on the Baltic Sea, and the advice was gladly accepted.

On the eve of our departure, two