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# Konzert in J.F.Kennedy Center Washington:

## Xaver Scharwenka: Piano Concerto No. 4 in F minor, Op. 82

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### About the Composition

Quick Look **Composer: Scharwenka**

Program note originally written for the following performance:

[National Symphony Orchestra: Osmo Vanska, conductor/Stephen Hough, Piano Apr 10 - 12, 2003](#)

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The Concerto in F minor, composed in 1908; **Scharwenka** conducted the first performance, given in Berlin on October 31 of that year, with his pupil Martha Siebold at the piano, and played the solo part himself for the first time a little more than a year later, on November 27, 1910, with Gustav Mahler conducting the New York Philharmonic. The Concerto enters the repertory of the National Symphony Orchestra in the present concerts.

In addition to the solo piano, the score, dedicated to Queen Elisabeth of Romania, calls for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, cymbals, triangle, and strings. Duration, 40 minutes.

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**Xaver Scharwenka** was the very model of the phenomenon known as the virtuoso-composer. He was one of the last practitioners of that tradition, and he brought it—and his zeal for musical training on the highest level—to our country at a time when it could make a difference, and did. **Xaver** and his older brother Philipp (1847-1917) were both remarkably effective musicians and educators. Neither of them had significant musical training himself until their family settled in Berlin in 1865. Both were enrolled that year in the Neue Akademie der Tonkunst, founded and directed by Theodor Kullak, himself an outstanding pianist, who was Xaver's principal teacher. Philipp did not become a performer, but concentrated on composing and teaching; in addition to his numerous original works,

he orchestrated the charming Spanish Dances of his compatriot and colleague Moritz Moszkowski. **Xaver**, whose music is performed in these concerts, was conspicuously active on many musical fronts: he distinguished himself as a pianist early on, and eventually became court pianist to the Emperor of Austria, a favorite of the King of Prussia, and recipient of decorations from royalty elsewhere. It was at the suggestion of Princess Sophie, later Queen of Albania, who attended the premiere of the Fourth Concerto, that **Scharwenka** dedicated the work to Queen Elisabeth of Romania, who was herself a serious enough pianist to have studied with Clara Schumann but had become more active as a writer, under the pen name Carmen Sylva; when he subsequently visited Bucharest at her invitation he was the center of attention at the royal court and received the Cross of Commander of the Crown of Romania from the King.

As a composer, **Xaver Scharwenka** produced far fewer works than his brother Philipp—a single opera, a symphony, some chamber music, many piano pieces, and four dazzling piano concertos—but his compositions became enormously popular. Following his debut at age 19 he joined his brother on the faculty of Kullak's academy. Shortly before his 25th birthday he began touring throughout Europe, and then began organizing concerts in Berlin, where in 1881 he established his own conservatory. Five years later, by which time he had become a conductor, he began a concert series in which he focused on the recent works of Berlioz and Liszt as well as the Beethoven symphonies. (Like so many other young musicians of his time, he received direct encouragement from Liszt early in his career, in appreciation for which he dedicated his First Concerto to him.) In 1891 **Scharwenka** visited America for the first time. He liked what he saw and opened a New York branch of his conservatory. Although he eventually moved back to Berlin (in 1898), he continued to make frequent tours of the U.S. and Canada; by 1914, when the outbreak of World War I put a halt to his American tours, he had crossed the Atlantic 26 times. He thereupon created another music school in Berlin, and he continued active in all his musical endeavors for his remaining ten years. During those last years he wrote a remembrance in which he recalled his childhood in a town in what was then part of East Prussia and now is in Poland:

There I grew up, the joy of my parents and the dread of the neighborhood. Old residents still recall with horror the time I decorated the walls of their houses with charcoal drawings of locomotives on which the engineer stood and played a fiddle. This was the first sign of my ardent love for music and travel.

As such a remark indicates, Scharwenka was a good-natured fellow, beloved as well as respected by his colleagues and his public. When he was asked about technique and urged to produce a piano “method” for publication, he put down the idea, commenting that there is “no single ‘correct’ method,” but “merely methodical ways of doing things.” He would tap his forehead and remark, “The pianist who reaches the top is the one who uses this,” and continue, holding up his fingers, “not the one who places all his confidence in these.”

Since his death **Scharwenka** has been remembered almost entirely on the strength of his Polish Dance, Op. 3, No. 1, which made him famous when he was young and which persisted in turning up in recitals and occasional recordings throughout the last century. All four of his concertos went into decline at about the time of his death, though some have enjoyed brief revivals from time to time. It was Stephen Hough, the soloist in the present concerts, who rescued the Fourth Concerto from oblivion, in his premiere recording of with Lawrence Foster and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra for Hyperion in 1995. That CD (Steven Heliotes's quite exceptional note for which contains a great deal more background on the fascinating **Scharwenka** that we are able to present here) garnered just about every significant award in the field, and since then Mr. Hough has revalidated his enthusiasm for the work by performing it everywhere and with increasing frequency,

leaving audiences wondering how such an attractive piece could have suffered such neglect for so long.

The last of Scharwenka's concertos may well be regarded as the capstone to the series. It may be regarded as one of the very last grand gestures of the 19th-century tradition, in the early years of the 20th: in that respect, **Scharwenka** was simply continuing in a style that was true to himself, while various composers, younger than he, continued writing 19th-century music much later, and with a good deal less distinction. His score boasts an abundance of the old virtues: melody, color, momentum, an instinctively judged balance of emotion and tastefulness, and—by no means incidentally—the brilliant demands upon and opportunities for the soloist that only a composer who was himself an outstanding virtuoso performer could concoct. His objective, clearly, was to provide intense pleasure for everyone on both sides of the footlights, and he brought it off with a very sure hand and a warm heart.

The Concerto is cast in four movements instead of the traditional three. As Liszt and Schumann had done, **Scharwenka** gave his elaborately proportioned opening movement ( *Allegro patetico* ) a theme that is (a) put through a considerable process of metamorphosis in this movement and (b) recalled in the subsequent ones. The “extra” movement, which comes between the opening one and the “slow movement,” is an *Intermezzo* ( *Allegretto molto tranquillo* ), and the designation suits it well, as it is for the most part a respite from the intensity that precedes and follows it. The slow movement itself ( *Lento, mesto* ), a relatively intimate section, is rather elegiac in nature, but with a good deal of darkness-and-light contrast; it leads without pause (and with a recollection of the principal theme of the opening movement) directly into the finale ( *Allegro con fuoco* ), a vigorous jubilation of sparks, filigree and occasional thunder, all somehow balanced within a lyric frame.

As already noted, **Scharwenka** conducted the first performance of his final concerto, and performed as soloist a year later in the work's American premiere under Mahler. He continued for years to perform the piece in both roles, always as soloist in America, frequently as conductor in Europe. At the end of a long European tour in which he had performed the Concerto frequently as soloist, he played the solo part in Berlin with Ferruccio Busoni on the podium, and then conducted it with Moriz Rosenthal at the keyboard. On the latter occasion, he reported, Rosenthal “performed veritable orgies of virtuosity upon the keyboard and had tumultuous success.” Rosenthal (1862-1946), the brilliant pupil of Liszt, had written to **Scharwenka** at the time of the work's premiere,

It has charmed and moved me to no little degree. In your youth you created that masterwork your B-flat-minor Concerto [No. 1], and now in your mature years you present to the world a work full of youthful fire and ardor which rivets the attention with its verve and impetuosity.

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