

South Africa's Award-Winning Pianist to Perform with the KZN Philharmonic

Interview by Haylea Heyns

The KwaZulu-Natal Philharmonic Orchestra returns to the Durban City Hall for its four-week Early Spring Symphony Season of sublime world-class music from 24 August to 14 September. Among the special features of the season is South African pianist and Steinway Artist, Ben Schoeman, who will be performing Mozart's Piano Concerto No.20 in D minor on August 31, a composition considered one of the most revolutionary of Mozart's entire life's work.

Schoeman is regarded as one of South Africa's foremost pianists and has performed for audiences throughout the world, most notably on prestigious stages such as the Wigmore and Queen Elizabeth Halls in London, the Konzerthaus in Berlin, the Gulbenkian Auditorium in Lisbon and Carnegie Hall in New York. He was the first South African in history to win the grand prize in the 11th UNISA Vodacom International Piano Competition in Pretoria, and was the winner of the 2011 Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Music.

Schoeman was introduced to music at the age of four when his mother, a church organist, insisted that he began formal violin lessons. He was six when he took an interest in the keys – playing on his family piano at home, eight when he began formal training, and by the time he was 11 he had already set his sights on becoming a concert pianist. He says it was a “burning desire” deep within him to pursue this career path, and “he didn't choose it, it chose him.” It is this passion together with the “fierce teachers” who mentored him, that brought to fruition the award winning, world-renowned master of his craft that he is today.

Schoeman loves performing in Durban, particularly at the Durban City Hall which he admires for its beauty and the fact that it has one of the best pianos in the country – an instrument that he equates playing to “driving a Ferrari.” Schoeman is extremely passionate when he speaks about his upcoming performance with the KZN Philharmonic and looks forward to playing Mozart's Piano Concerto No.20 in D minor because it is a tremendously “intricate and difficult piece, and one with immense poignancy”, he marvels. It is one of his favourite compositions and one of Mozart's most dramatic and romantic works. It has moments of intense darkness counterpoised with moments of light, and has some beautiful parts written for the strings and woodwinds.

Schoeman is a very keen piano teacher and recently conducted a master class at the University of Pretoria. He was pleased to see the level of hard work and talent evident in the music students enrolled there, and has high hopes for the state of classical music in South Africa, but insists that “outreach work is essential” in order to keep it alive. Although Schoeman knew he wanted to be concert pianist from a very young age, he could also have been an artist, he muses. He is very fond and passionate about the visual arts and visiting exhibitions and art museums is a favourite pastime of his. “There is no other art form that relates so strongly to music,” says Schoeman.

Schoeman recently completed his doctoral thesis at City University London on the piano music of Stefans Grové, and received the Laureate award for his contribution to music in South Africa. His debut solo album, featuring the works of Franz Liszt, is available under the TwoPianists label.

Ben Schoeman performs with The KwaZulu-Natal Philharmonic Orchestra in the second concert of the Early Spring Symphony Season on Thursday 31 August at 7.30pm. Tickets are available from www.computicket.com 0861 915 8000, or from Shoprite Checkers Money Market Counters.

Concert Two: Early Spring Season

Date: Thursday 31 August. 7.30pm

Venue: Durban City Hall

Conductor: Wolfram Christ

Soloist: Ben Schoeman, piano

Programme: Weber Turandot: Overture and March

Mozart Piano Concerto No. 20 in d minor (K466)

Schumann Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 97, “Rhenische”

Pre-concert Lecture: Dr. Teddy Pillay

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