

- **CLASSICAL**

# BEN SCHOEMAN INTERVIEW

12 Feb 2019  
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Pianist Ben Schoeman will be playing the mighty Piano Concerto by Brahms with the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra. He spoke to **PETA STEWART** about the work:



Pianist Ben Schoeman has known many of the musicians in the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra (CPO) for so many years that he feels it is like playing chamber music with them ... but there are two things he is looking forward to on this occasion. He is playing the mighty Piano Concerto by Brahms on February 14 2019 in the final concert of the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra's 13<sup>th</sup> Summer Music Festival, and he is playing for the first time in the "opulently-renovated City Hall and on the new Steinway piano".

What's more, he is happy to be playing Brahms.

"Brahms is one of my top favourite composers. His two Piano Concertos are the most symphonic in this genre and very exciting and demanding to play.

I've performed the Second with the CPO, but the First is very different. It is much darker and one strongly feels the sadness of the aftermath of the suicide attempt of Brahms's mentor Robert Schumann. The piece takes one on a miraculous journey of discovery and it contains a distinct development from deep emotional turmoil to a triumphant youthful exuberance at the end," explains Ben Schoeman.

He is ready for Brahms, because he will just have performed a Schubert Birthday Concert in Devon with his duo partner [Tessa Uys](#) and "there is a similarity between Schubert and Brahms in terms of spirituality and harmonic complexity and depth."

Schoeman comes from a musical family, and attended concerts in Pretoria as a child, encouraged in his music studies by family, friends and teachers.

"At the age of 11, I discovered Sviatoslav Richter and Emil Gilels, and saw a film of Claudio Arrau playing Liszt and found it deeply moving. That's when I realized that I wanted to be a pianist," he says.

### **Many musical mentors**

He has had many musical personalities in his life, many mentors like Tessa Uys, with whom he often works. "When I studied in Italy pianist Maria Tretyakova introduced me to the Russian traditions of piano playing, and we became good friends, sharing many lively and inspiring conversations about music," says Schoeman.

The late John Roos, Director of the UNISA Music Foundation, was a great professional example to him. They became close after Schoeman won the 2008 UNISA International Piano Competition, one of several he has won.

Others include the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Music (2011), and the contemporary music prize at the Cleveland International Piano Competition in 2013. In 2016, he was awarded the Huberte Rupert Prize from the South African Academy of Arts and Sciences for his contribution to music in South Africa.

Schoeman divides his time between South Africa and his London home. He is a senior lecturer at the University of Pretoria, where he took his undergraduate degree before going on to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Scuola di Musica di Fiesole and the International Piano Academy in Imola, Italy.



“The academic side of music fascinates me, so this is a unique opportunity to bring together my interests in both performance and musicology.”

### **Work life music balance**

In between his international concert engagements – he also has a duo partnership with cellist Anzél Gerber in addition to the duo with Tessa Uys – he is teaching, which includes supervising the academic work of his students, working on articles on South African art music and piano technique, and practising. He also goes to the gym, because he believes in physical exercise to balance his life. And he reads late into the night.

What time is left is spent travelling, visiting family and friends, learning new repertoire and devising interesting programmes. "Working with contemporary composers is a rewarding and exciting aspect."

What's next?

Ben Schoeman is presenting several recitals in the coming months, including an Easter-inspired one at La Motte on 13 April. He will also perform Shostakovich's Second Piano Concerto and Bach's Triple Concerto in D minor in the Mission in Pretoria on 7 April as part of the celebrations of the opening of a new School of Arts at the University of Pretoria.

In the longer term, "I want to perform all Beethoven's Piano Sonatas. That is one of the many repertoire-learning challenges that I set for myself."

The concert is nearly sold out but the dress rehearsal at 11am on the same day is open to the public with tickets at the door. Since the Beethoven Pastoral Symphony is the second piece on the programme, which will be conducted by Victor Yampolsky, and it is a set-piece for the matric syllabus, many learners are coming to it.

**What:** Pianist Ben Schoeman and the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra,

**Where and when:** Cape Town City Hall 8pm, dress rehearsal 11am on 14 February 2019

**Book:** [Computicket](#) and Artscape Dial-A-Seat 021 421 7695