

String when you're winning

The teenage violinist Nicola Benedetti has landed a £1m record deal. Has success gone to her head? Jessica Duchen finds out

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When a slender, dark-eyed, 16-year-old girl lifted her bow and began to play the exotic music of Karol Szymanowski's Violin Concerto No 1, the audience at the BBC Young Musician of the Year 2004 final realised they were hearing something out of the ordinary. There had been much excitement over Benjamin Grosvenor, an 11-year-old piano prodigy; some expected him to walk away with the prize. But it was clear to me, for one, that Nicola Benedetti was exceptional.

Her rich, expressive tone, her assured and controlled technique and her intuitive grasp of this complex concerto and its subtle colours marked her as a musician far ahead of her years: a fully fledged artist, ready to begin her career there and then.

In fact, Benedetti had already begun her career. She trained at the Yehudi Menuhin School, home to the cream of young musical talent in the UK, and left at 15 to concentrate on the violin alone. Before the BBC competition, she had already been snapped up by the powerful agency IMG, and several record companies had expressed interest. But the prize accelerated matters; last week it was announced that Benedetti has signed for Deutsche Grammophon in a six-album, £1m deal that sets her up as one of the biggest stars of her generation.

Benedetti, trying to keep warm in a Soho restaurant on a freezing January morning, hasn't let the flood of attention go to her head. Even so, it's astonishing to think that she's only 17, because she has the self-possession of someone a good five years older. Part of that is perhaps the result of leaving home aged 10 to board at the Menuhin School; she has scarcely lived at home since. But it must also spring from her inner certainty about her vocation. Most people with a vocation, no matter its type, just want the chance to be themselves and fulfil that certainty. She is no exception.

And she needs her sense of self, because it's not only her playing that has captured the imagination. Her Italianate beauty and engaging Scottish accent make her a marketer's dream. The minute the nation saw her on television, the question was inevitable: would she be the next skimpily clad "classical babe", the next crossover whizz-kid like Vanessa-Mae?

Benedetti may not be averse to a spot of modelling, but she seems puzzled by the peculiarly British assumption that she would instantly fling herself downmarket. No such tabloid pressures were brought to bear on violinists such as the American Hilary Hahn or the Korean-born Sarah Chang, who began performing as young as Benedetti. And, had Benedetti been German or Russian, such notions would have been unthinkable. "It is very strange," Benedetti remarks. "Sometimes people almost ask, 'Why are you not doing pop music?' My answer is, 'Why should I? I'm a classical musician! That's what I do, that's what I love and there shouldn't be any pressure on me to change that. I'm not rejecting or rebelling against anything. I'm just being myself.'"

Benedetti first encountered a violin thanks to a gifted violin teacher at school and her elder sister's enthusiasm for the instrument. They began lessons together aged eight and four; her sister Stephanie is now studying at the Royal College of Music. There was no music in the family, although plenty of material advantages (including Benedetti's 1751 Guarneri violin) came from their Italian father's success in the pharmaceutical industry. But the girls were not surrounded by music, and there was no "pushy parent" syndrome.

"It was always our own choice," Benedetti says. "I never thought twice about picking up the violin and practising. On a few occasions, Mum had to tell me that I ought to practise because otherwise I wouldn't be ready to play in a particular concert or audition. But I always loved it."

She's proud, too, of her Italian heritage - "So much music has come from Italy and most of the great violins were made there" - but now goes to Italy less frequently. "We used to go skiing every year, until I was told that I needed to be more careful about my hands. I haven't skied since. That does annoy me, because I absolutely loved it."

Since leaving the Menuhin School, Benedetti has lodged in London with her accompanist. Her family are unlikely to move south, she says: "I think they're quite happy to let me live my own life. They know I work well when I'm feeling more independent. I think that to live with my family might hold me back slightly; I'm comfortable dealing with things myself and being in control of what's going on." In any case, West Kilbride is too far from the action - and especially from her teacher, the Polish violinist Maciej Rakowski. What does he make of all the fuss? "Actually, he thinks it's rather funny."

On Saturday, Benedetti will be among several leading violinists performing at the Wigmore Hall in London in a concert entitled *A Celebration of the Violin*, in which she will play two new works written for her. The event, presented by the music publisher Music Sales, will launch the Wigmore Hall New Music Fund, a scheme to enable the hall to fund new commissions.

One piece, *Fragments for the Virgin*, by the redoubtable John Tavener, will receive its world premiere; the other is an arrangement by Craig Armstrong of the Scottish song "My Love Is like a Red Red Rose". Armstrong is best known for his work with the director Baz Luhrmann in films such as *Moulin Rouge!* and *Romeo + Juliet*.

Benedetti made her Wigmore Hall debut last year and was bowled over by playing at this legendary venue with its marvellous acoustic. "I played a couple of notes and thought, 'This is absolutely incredible!' An acoustic like that is a gift for a violinist. You can play as quietly as possible and know that everybody will be able to hear you."

No less upmarket is her first CD, which she has recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra and the conductor Daniel Harding. It features her Szymanowski concerto, with the *Poème* by Chausson, the new Tavener piece and works by Massenet and Saint-Saëns. This meaty programme was a challenge for a first recording. "It was a lot to get through in the time we had," Benedetti says. "I know that when I'm listening back to it, there'll be things I'll be critical of in my playing. At my age, you're progressing and developing, and aspects of your playing can become very different very quickly. I have to accept that it's really just a snapshot of how I'm playing right now - except that there are always going to be things like that." Benedetti is clearly not planning to rest on her laurels.

She also feels she has a mission to encourage young people towards classical music. This spring, she tours UK schools in conjunction with the Sargent Cancer Care for Children Practiceathon. "I'm passionate about breaking down the categories of classical and pop music," she explains. "I don't want to mix the two styles, but just to make children aware that classical music is not so far away from pop music.

"A lot of youngsters are intimidated by listening to something that requires real concentration. But by introducing children at a very young age to this music as something positive, making it less of a foreign language to them, you can show that it portrayed how people behaved, lived and felt in the time it was written.

"You understand more of what's happening today when you understand more of what happened then. Pop music is what people are attracted to listening to right now, and I don't criticise it at all; I listen to pop music too. But I'd like people to realise that you can appreciate both."

And after all that? "I don't have one fixed idea of how life is going to go," she says. "I'm aware that people believe I'm going to be a solo violinist, play in certain venues with certain conductors, and if it doesn't happen then it looks disastrous. But the more playing I do, the more exciting I find it - and as long as I still have that interest, I'll continue playing and hopefully developing. And if I can have respect as a violinist among the musicians I really respect, then I know I'll go to bed and wake up a happy girl."

Benedetti is now looking forward to a tour of Scotland with the Edinburgh Youth Orchestra and to the release of that first CD. And after that? The sky is the limit.

Nicola Benedetti plays in A Celebration of the Violin, Wigmore Hall, London WC1 (020-7935 2141), on 6 February. Her CD is out in April on DG