

## **Nicola Benedetti: Still young, but now a proper star**

The violinist won BBC Young Musician of the Year six years ago, aged 16. She tells Jessica Duchon about her new CD, her Stradivarius and why practice makes perfect

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From behind the double-basses I can just glimpse Nicola Benedetti and her violin. The Teresa Carreno Youth Orchestra of Venezuela is in full swing in the foyer of London's Queen Elizabeth Hall, playing the Bach Concerto for Two Violins to local schoolchildren. Benedetti and the orchestra's leader are the soloists. The music-making is volcanic and the listening children sit saucer-eyed; as for Bach with eight double-basses, it sounds absolutely glorious.

It's hard to imagine anyone better than a young, photogenic and tremendously communicative violin star to inspire children towards a passion for music. Benedetti is only 23, barely older than the Venezuelan visitors, yet she has the complete assurance of a mature soloist and the whole-hearted commitment of someone who knows exactly what she wants to do and how to go about doing it.

When she won the BBC Young Musician of the Year Competition in 2004, aged 16, the prize launched a sky-rocket of a career. She was signed to a million-pound, six-CD recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon/Universal Classics; the world was at her feet. Nearly seven years on, she's an international star, plays a Stradivarius violin from 1714 on loan to her from an American bank, and has just recorded two of the most popular violin concertos ever written, the Tchaikovsky and the Bruch.

As her previous recordings feature repertoire from off the beaten track, the new disc represents Benedetti encroaching at last on the territory of the greatest soloists on record. She will play the Bruch Concerto with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall in November. But Benedetti is not just another star violinist: she's set apart by her new preoccupation with music education and her potential as a role model. She has become determined to show a generation obsessed with instant TV celebrity that you get nowhere worthwhile without hard graft.

"There's a concept that started in pop culture: the idea of the celebrity who is instantly famous, regardless of whether they have the proper skill or not," she says. "That attitude unfortunately is filtering through to people who do have talent and skills; they feel that, because the youth are influenced by that culture, they too have to promote things as if they are 'really fun' and 'you'll get this effect if you do

something for five minutes'. There's nothing to point out that it's necessary to calm down and be serious about those skills. It's not all excitement and fun: it is hard work. But that's the point, that's life! And if you put in the effort while you're younger, you will almost certainly enjoy your life more later on. This is almost not being said anywhere."

Benedetti was born in West Kilbride, the daughter of parents who had both come to Scotland from Italy as small children. Self-determination through hard work is clearly part of the family ethos and she certainly didn't reach her current level by magic.

"I worked terribly hard," she declares, "but did I miss out on anything? No. Was I unhappy? No. I was much happier having a strict focus and structure to my life and work than I'd have been without it."

By the age of eight she was practising the violin for an hour and a half every day, "and at weekends all the time, four hours on Saturdays and Sundays, which is a lot for that age." The hard work paid off: in 1997 she was accepted as a pupil at the Yehudi Menuhin School. At 15 she was ready to begin her career, and the BBC prize followed a year later.

Now she's determined to use her many gifts to best effect. "I feel clear about what I want my position to be in relation to education in the UK, especially Scotland – I feel extremely strongly about it," she says.

"Previously, I knew I was quite good at public speaking, dealing with children and doing master-classes, but I didn't value it enough: all my sense of self-worth was tied up in my playing and how well my last concert went. But I've grown to appreciate that these skills are something worth really using." She is devoted to Sistema Scotland, an education scheme based on the Venezuelan model, and is planning regular visits to its Big Noise orchestral project in Raploch, as well as to educational activities on London's South Bank.

"I've been researching the whole spectrum of the UK's music-education programmes, to get a broad understanding of how things work, who it reaches, who it doesn't, what the results are, who benefits from it," she says. "I think there's lots that can be improved and I want to be someone who helps try to do that."

Nor would she give up easily. "My Italian background is hugely important to me, in ways I can't control – like my temperament. Quite a few Italians are a tad on the dramatic side! If I'm passionate about an idea, nobody can deter me: I will go with it 100-per-cent. I guess that idealistic approach is maybe a bit Italian."

Fans need not worry, though, that she is about to junk playing in favour of teaching. Her international schedule is more demanding than ever and, with her energy levels she can evidently do both.

Travelling with a valuable violin has its moments. "I'm always so precious about asking airport security to be careful with it when it's going through the machine," she says, "but a few years ago, with my old violin, I was in Glasgow Airport at 5am and I forgot to pick it up from the scanner. I sat at the gate for 15 minutes before thinking, 'Oh God, where's my violin?' I dashed back to security – they know me by now, and they were laughing so much!"

And, last but not least, there's the Ryanair issue: the requirement that an extra seat must be bought for a violin, while cellos apparently are no longer welcome on board at all – something that affects Benedetti's cellist boyfriend. She is distinctly peeved by this.

"I was asked recently which one person I would most like to vanish," Benedetti says, "and at first I was horrified, I thought, 'I can't answer that'. Then I realised I could: [Ryanair boss] Michael O'Leary!"

*Nicola Benedetti's CD of the Bruch and Tchaikovsky Violin Concertos is out now on DG. She plays the Bruch Violin Concerto at the Royal Albert Hall on 25 November with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Andrew Litton*

### **Where are they now? Five BBC Young Musicians grow up**

#### **Nicholas Daniel (oboe)**

Winner, 1980. Now among the world's most celebrated oboe soloists, Daniel is associate artistic director of Britten Sinfonia and the artistic director of Leicester International Music Festival. He has more than 30 recordings under his belt and has had new works written for him by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, John Tavener and Michael Berkeley, among many others.

#### **Tasmin Little (violin)**

Strings final, 1982. A leading international soloist, Little's latest CD is the Elgar Violin Concerto. In 2008 she released a new solo recording, "The Naked Violin", free on the internet in conjunction with grass-roots education work and was on "The South Bank Show".

#### **Natalie Clein (cello)**

Winner, 1994. An international soloist with special interest in groundbreaking collaborative projects, for example with the dancer Carlos Acosta and the author Jeanette Winterson. She appeared in the film "Elgar's Tenth Muse" with James Fox. and in 2005 won a Classical Brit. Her latest CD is cello music by Kodaly.

#### **Guy Johnston (cello)**

Winner, 2000. From a family of musicians, Johnston was a chorister at King's College Cambridge. He won a Classical Brit in 2001 and released his debut recital disc, "Milo", featuring 20th-century British works, in May. A member of Aronowitz Ensemble, he now features in the BBC New Generation Artists.

#### **Benjamin Grosvenor (piano)**

Piano finalist, 2004 (when Benedetti won), aged only 11. A former child prodigy, featured in Alan Yentob's "Imagine" series. Now 18, enjoying a burgeoning career with exceptional critical adulation. His debut disc, "This and That", was released this year. He is currently a member of the BBC's New Generation Artists.

