



Best summer of my life -
Nicola Benedetti



Sister act

Nicola Benedetti takes seriously her responsibility to a new generation of musicians and has been an outspoken supporter of music education. The former BBC Young Musician of the Year talks to David Kettle about plans for her own music academy, and why crossover leaves her cold

‘It’s probably been my busiest year ever, and I would definitely say the best summer of my life so far.’ West Kilbride-born violinist Nicola Benedetti has good reason to be glowing – and also slightly reeling – after an eventful few months that have seen no fewer than three BBC Proms performances (including the Last Night), debuts with the Chicago and Washington symphony orchestras, her first performance at the Edinburgh International Festival (with the LSO and Valery Gergiev), the release of a best-selling CD, and even an appearance at Scotland’s hottest rock festival.

‘It was an amazing experience to play at T in the Park,’ she enthuses. ‘I felt a little out of my comfort zone, to put it politely, but people listened, and that was what I was there to do – to get them to listen to classical music.’

It is a commitment that she stresses again and again: to use her seemingly unstoppable popularity in the service of classical music, to expose the greatest number of people she can to it, and to ensure she’s giving them the best performances possible. ‘It’s what I’m trying to do with my whole life: to maintain the quality, seriousness and dedication of developing as a musician, but alongside that trying to proselytise, to go out spreading the word about classical music as much as possible.’

That is also the thinking behind her most recent CD, *The Silver Violin*, which famously entered the UK album charts at No 36 in September (beating Justin Bieber and Labrinth) and topped Amazon’s music chart. Taking the Korngold violin concerto as its starting point, it is based around the theme of the violin at the movies and also incorporates tunes from the films *Schindler’s List*, *Shutter Island* and *Ladies in Lavender*.

‘It’s not a disc of Tchaikovsky and Bruch concertos – it’s something more unusual and conceptual. But I’m trying to combine something that you’re maybe introducing people

to, like the Korngold concerto, with things that are very instantaneous – although I think they’re all very well-written pieces.’

Whether it’s a case of tempting new listeners to explore the Korngold work by also giving them more familiar fare, or rather of surrounding a serious work with more populist material to sell more copies is down to your individual point of view. And Benedetti accepts that it’s not an easy balance: ‘With so many classical violinists out there, all of us can come up with our own interpretations of the same music. But this is a chance to be somewhat creative. I’m sure I won’t get it right every time, but I’m taking that chance, and trying to broaden the appeal.’

She took a similar chance in accepting the invitation to play at T in the Park, and is proud that the repertoire she chose – selections from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, Monti’s *Csárdás*, the intermezzo from *Cavalleria rusticana* – was unadulteratedly classical. Indeed, Benedetti is pretty uncomfortable with the whole idea of crossover. ‘It’s just not my preference – music that’s sung in an operatic voice but that’s actually a Whitney Houston song, or Vivaldi with a pop beat,’ she says. ‘My personal taste tells me it’s not very high quality and just doesn’t sound very good. I don’t think classical music needs to be altered.’

On the other hand, Benedetti is more than aware of the commercial realities of being a high-profile classical musician. But, she says, simply shifting discs is not an end in itself. ‘Everybody needs to sell, and I think the

“I’m like the big sister to the children at Sistema Scotland”

minute you understand that, you're in a much better position, not to compromise, but to tell people about the music, to get people listening to it.' Using commercial success to spread the word about the virtues of classical music: it's a noble aim, and Benedetti is unapologetic about admiring commercially successful artists.

'I don't see it as a negative in terms of trying to understand the mind of someone who sells hundreds of thousands of discs. I'm interested to see what their take on it is. But at the end of the day, the driving factor has to be your belief in the music.'

With her remarkable achievements and steadily growing popularity since winning the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition in 2004, Benedetti is in danger of becoming something of a national treasure, and certainly she is seen as box office gold in her birth nation. But with increasing prominence and popularity comes an increasing media focus not on her musical skills, but on the more ephemeral values of celebrity. An interview with Benedetti in the *Scottish Sun* in September raised more than a few eyebrows in the classical community, with its fixation on her appearance and leering suggestions about her love life.

'I've never really been interested at all in being famous,' she says, 'so the frenzied, insane proportions of how something like that can escalate were in a way fascinating. I was impressed with people's lack of acceptance at what they considered to be sexism. But I'm always happy that an article about a classical musician is in a paper that sells that number of copies. They can talk about whatever they want, but I'm going to carry on talking about music.' But surely she was a bit shocked by the article's insinuations? In fact, she says, it's an occupational hazard. 'I can honestly say that I was quoted quite accurately, which is more than I can say for a lot of other interviews I've done.'

Benedetti is reluctant to expand further. But she's well aware of the impact that her words can have. 'I do feel an enormous responsibility towards young people who see me, or listen to anything I say, and I take that very seriously.'

"The driving factor has to be your belief in the music"

Benedetti the campaigner: 'It's a sad, sad day when more and more parents are having to pay for their children to have a simple music lesson every week'

DECCA/SIMON FOWLER



Watch the hordes of keen young audience members hanging on Benedetti's every note at one of her concerts and you'll see what she means. And getting youngsters involved in music is itself a subject that she's been outspoken about, attacking school music cuts in a recent interview in the *Radio Times*.

'To me, it's a sad, sad day when more and more parents are having to pay for their children to have a simple music lesson every week,' she says. 'I will always fight against small incremental cuts, but I'm also trying to focus on getting the people at the top to properly understand the benefits of a good music education.'

Those benefits, in Benedetti's opinion, are simple to explain but difficult to quantify. 'With a truly good music education, which requires investment, you are helping young people to find confidence in themselves and their own creativity. Without creative minds and without confident children growing into confident adults, what are they going to produce? I'm not even just talking about the arts, but in maths, science, starting a business. And it's not just about making money – it's about creating a better world for people, being able to understand your potential.'

So much for the theory. But Benedetti is developing a project to put her ideas into practice. 'It's all at a very early stage,' she explains, 'but my aim is to try to help teachers, to pass on all the skills I've been taught. My dream is to provide something like an academy – it doesn't necessarily have to be a physical space, but

something that's set up in different places each year, a hub of information.'

Does this sound suspiciously close to the coalition government's plans for music education hubs bringing together arts and educational institutions? Benedetti is aware of the similarity. 'I love that idea in principle, but of course there's also the argument that it costs less money, and that's basically why they're doing it. But if they do utilise and play on the strengths of the strongest, and don't become hubs for mediocrity, then they could be a really good thing.'

It remains to be seen how Benedetti's own academy plans develop, but she's already played a pivotal role in the success of Sistema Scotland. 'I'm like the big sister to the children there,' she explains, 'which means anything from sitting on the board to teaching the children and working with the teachers.' And she's keen to see similar success in the recently announced second project in Govanhill, Glasgow.

In terms of her future performances, Benedetti remains tight-lipped, but there's little sign of any let-up in her activities. 'The opportunities I have in the next couple of years are so exciting, and I couldn't ask for anything more. I just want to make sure I'm strong enough to maintain enough time to take care of my own development.' And with her mission to spread classical music to as wide an audience as possible, as well as ever-increasing media exposure, education projects and high-profile performances, finding time for herself might just be her biggest challenge.

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