

The logo for Amati, featuring the word "AMATI" in a bold, sans-serif font, enclosed in a thin grey rectangular border.

EDITOR'S BRUNCH: NICOLA BENEDETTI AND LEONARD ELSCHENBROICH

Amati is delighted to present a substantial interview with Nicola Benedetti and her partner, cellist Leonard Elschenbroich – the first non-filmed one they have given together. Over a lavish West London brunch they tell Jessica Duchon about helping one another, finding your own pace, and practising in the bathroom

With Jessica Duchon, August 3rd 2015

Nicola Benedetti and Leonard Elschenbroich cut quite a couple, charismatic even off duty as they wander together into Annie's Restaurant in Barnes well before lunchtime. Time to stop, eat and talk is hard to come by for these two sought-after musicians – but brunch is one of life's guilty pleasures and Annie's, a West London favourite with wooden tables, bright cushions and cosy ambience, is ready to indulge our whims.

'We're in America,' the musicians joke as giant helpings arrive – Benedetti chooses eggs, mushrooms and beans while Elschenbroich feasts on a superfood version with sourdough toast accompanying poached eggs and avocado; and they split a bowl of fruity granola, while I plump (perhaps too literally) for magnificent eggs florentine. The whole idea of brunch is two meals rolled into one, but this version takes it literally, to everyone's delight.

The strings world's own celebrity couple, Benedetti and Elschenbroich kept their relationship under wraps – at least from the press – for a good while. Now, though, they often tour together, whether in their trio with the pianist Alexei Grynyuk (with whom they give a Proms chamber music lunchtime concert in September) or *à deux* in repertoire such as the Brahms Double Concerto.

This September they embark upon a major nationwide tour themed around Italy and the Four Seasons. Promoters might pounce on the idea of presenting them together, but they don't exactly object. 'It's the only way we can guarantee we'll be spending time together,' says Elschenbroich. 'Not only doing those concerts, but rehearsing and travelling too.'

'Half my practice times were written on the schedule as BATHROOM'

How do they deal with practising on those rare occasions when they are both home? 'We're used to hearing someone else playing while we practise,' says Elschenbroich, 'because of school.' Just two years apart in age, both were pupils at the Yehudi Menuhin School. Back then, Benedetti notes, the school's facilities were not all they are today. 'Half of my morning practice times were written on the schedule as "BATHROOM",' she declares. 'Every corridor, every space, had someone practising in it,' Elschenbroich recalls.

Both are multinational beings with Italian roots. Benedetti grew up in the west of Scotland with parents originally from Italy; she looks totally Italian, yet sounds completely Scottish. Elschenbroich was born in Frankfurt to a German mother and Italian father, but speaks with a hint of mid-Atlantic accent and has spent more than half his life in the UK. The turning point for him was a childhood visit to London with his mother. One evening, he says, they had to choose between a trip to the cinema or a concert by the Menuhin School orchestra. He picked the latter. 'At the concert, apparently I said to her: "Could you imagine how differently my life would have turned out if we'd gone to the movie?"' he recounts. 'I'd mapped out my whole life.'

'I realised when I came to the Menuhin School what it takes, how singularly you have to be focused on your practice,' he adds. 'I enjoyed being in that stream of everyone wanting to be the best. I met Nicky at school – she came to school in my second year, she was nine or ten, and I was 12. It's a tiny school, only 50 kids, so we saw each other all the time.' Benedetti laughs: 'We played on the stage of the RFH together when we were about 11.'

Growing pains

Both left the school at 15; but their initial paths were very different. Benedetti shot straight to stardom when she won the BBC Young Musician of the Year in 2004; by then she was studying privately with Maciej Rakowski and lodged with a family who by coincidence were friendly with Elschenbroich. 'He used to turn up now and then,' she recalls, 'but he was a bit of a cocky teenager then!'

He, by contrast, went to study in Cologne, where he lived in student accommodation surrounded by fellow budding musicians – many of them violinists studying with Zakhar Bron: 'I was in that student mentality, while Nicky wasn't in an institution at all.'

'I look at myself then and I seem to have experienced polar opposites,' says Benedetti, 'on the one hand being quite confident and knowing what I'm doing and why; but on the other hand I was probably more secluded than I should have been, shying away from more integrated environments with other like-

minded musicians. I loved my teacher, but I think I probably did have some fear of being at college, or in that kind of environment.'

'All the different aspects you need to be a fully rounded musician, they all come at some point, but at different points for different people,' Elschenbroich says. 'Circumstance changes too: because of Young Musician of the Year Nicky was put on stage as a soloist as a very young age. After that,' he adds, to her, 'you went more into playing chamber music and integrating more with other musicians. I had the exact opposite.' He has worked his way towards fame more slowly, via the BBC New Generation Artists and some much-praised recordings on the Onyx label.

'Nicky knows how I want to sound'

'The work we are doing, in terms of literally getting better at our instruments, is about development that doesn't have a cut-off point,' Benedetti points out. 'I'd say both of us have worked out many things in the last year and a half – and I'm 28 and he's 30. I've often heard that you have to have attained certain technical abilities by the age of X, or else it's too late – but I don't believe that at all!'

'People ask me if I ever play for anybody,' Elschenbroich says. 'In learning new things I'll play to Nicky – she's the closest thing I have to a teacher. I really *need* to work on things with you,' he adds, to her.

'Nicky knows how I want to sound. Usually when you play for someone else, they want you to sound like *they* want you to sound. And I can't deal with that any more at my age. But when we play to each other, she'll say, "I think you want X, but it's not coming out like that". And even if you record yourself, it's having an outside pair of ears that really helps.'

'It's the same for me,' Benedetti responds. 'I get used to the comfort of Leonard having heard me, giving me his feedback, saying "Yes this is good, you're prepared," or, "This is what you should work on". We do that for each other.'

Benedetti is a passionate advocate, and a vital figurehead, for music education in the UK and enjoys a flourishing involvement with Sistema Scotland as official 'Big Sister' for the Big Noise kids in Raploch. She plays us across the table a recording she made on her mobile phone of a recent rehearsal with them, full of spirit and musicality. "We only had to talk about the job in hand and it was a really enjoyable musical experience," she enthuses. Sistema Scotland has just opened a third centre, adding Aberdeenshire to the existing schemes in Raploch and Govanhill.

Elschenbroich is involved with a Sistema-like project further away. 'I'm the artistic mentor of the Orquesta Filharmonica di Bolivia, the first nationwide symphony orchestra in Bolivia,' he says. 'Three years ago I was in tour in Latin America and someone asked me to play with a group of 15 young musicians in Santa Cruz, aged 18-26. They'd got together, hired the hall

themselves, made posters – there's no subscription, management, subsidy or teachers, just young people themselves getting together. I played Saint-Saëns with them, and I was amazed by the commitment and force behind their will to play, how well they were playing and how differently they were playing from any orchestra I'd played with before: subjective, extreme, very exotic. With huge progress from the first rehearsal to the concert I decided I wanted to support them.

'In three years it has grown massively and generates enormous interest locally – people are so proud to have their own orchestra. Our last concert started half an hour late because so many people wanted to get in. What's unusual is there's no senior person saying that young people need music. It's young people saying, "We want music!" The oldest person in the hall is younger than me.'

A Rose-tinted cello

Leonard Elschenbroich with his Gofriller ex-Rose cello. Photo by Kaupo Kikkas

Elschenbroich plays a 1693 Gofriller cello that used to belong to another Leonard – Leonard Rose. 'I've had it on private loan from a German couple for ten years,' he says. 'From the first time I played it, I felt it was almost guessing the sound I wanted to make. People always say that Strads have such a strong personality that you just have to adjust to them,' he adds, 'while Gofriller – this one more than any other I've seen – really moulds to how it's being played.'

Yet it has its own voice: 'I'm playing *Schelomo* by Bloch and I've been listening to Leonard Rose's recording, which was made on this cello, with gut strings and a very different player, but I can recognise the sound; it's as if it goes right to the stomach, rather than the chest or the head. There's some frequency that hits you deeper than other instruments do.'

Benedetti plays a Strad on loan from Jonathan Moulds; about two and a half years ago she swapped her previous one for the 1717 'Gariel'. 'Both are fantastic, but this one perhaps suits me a little more,' she says. 'It's a little easier to manipulate, a little more even and a little less "masculine", so it takes less muscle to overcome it. The other one was darker; this one has bright overtones. It's an amazing sound.'

Both are facing a seriously busy summer. First, Benedetti is preparing to play the Korngold Violin Concerto at the Proms – a work that she championed on her bestselling recording *The Silver Violin*, involving violin music with movie associations.

'I'm very happy with that recording,' she remarks, 'but I probably lost about two months of sleep over that project. Deciding on the repertoire, the recording, the editing of it – it becomes all-consuming. And the Scottish album [entitled Homecoming] was similar.'

The great divide?

She and Elschenbroich are puzzled, not to say frustrated, by the continual divide in the music industry between repertoire for recording and that in demand in the concert hall. Their reasons, though, are very different. 'Some people might look at my recordings and ask why I'm playing Soviet music all the time,' says Elschenbroich. 'But I'm not. I'm playing Brahms and Beethoven just as much. You can't just record Brahms, Beethoven and Debussy, so it's difficult for your recordings to be a legacy of what you're doing at that time. But it's perhaps easier for me than it is for Nicky,' he adds, 'because Onyx is not necessarily out to make money; they're out to make interesting recordings.'

Benedetti's next recording is to be of Shostakovich and Glazunov, which is standard enough repertoire, but she admits that a quest for mass-market appeal would not always be her first choice. 'It's not that I'm against recording the Four Seasons one day,' she says, 'it's not that I'm against going into projects that bridge the audience gaps we all know are there. But it's not necessarily a representation of what I do for most of my life.'

The best of both worlds

Their forthcoming tour seems to bridge that gap, including not only super-popular Vivaldi, The Four Seasons, and Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir de Florence*, but also a brand-new piece written for them by Mark-Anthony Turnage. 'Turnage knew of both of us and met us at a Prom,' Benedetti recounts. 'We got talking about his pieces and there were kernels of ideas for violin and cello that he hadn't fully fleshed out – and he had a desire to write for that combination. Leonard and I are both big admirers of his compositions, so we approached him; he was very happy to take this on.'

'The piece, slightly embarrassingly, is based on the idea of the relationship between two people. For us that works on many levels, with the musical dialogue and the fact that we play together all the time. It's a suite of five character pieces, a little American in influences, as is often the case with him. We have quite a bit of learning to do!'

At their trio Prom with Alexei Grynyuk, there's another contemporary piece: *Butterflies Remember a Mountain*, by the American composer Arlene Sierra: 'It's a really good piece,' Elschenbroich says. 'It's one of the hardest things

we've ever had to learn because it's so transparent – if anything goes wrong, the whole picture crumbles. It took us ages to get it right.'

Benedetti and Elschenbroich are young still for such high-flying careers; getting it right seems, inevitably, a preoccupation in many contexts. But they appear to know themselves, and one another, extremely well; and if the public has taken them to their hearts individually and together, it is small wonder.

Nicola Benedetti plays the Korngold Violin Concerto at the Proms with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra under Kirill Karabits, 10 August. The Benedetti-Elschenbroich-Grynyuk Trio give a chamber music Prom at Cadogan Hall on 7 September, 1pm. Box office: 0845 401 5040.

Nicola Benedetti and Leonard Elschenbroich tour the UK and Ireland from 17-30 September including dates in Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Cambridge and London. Full details and tickets at www.nicolabenedetti.co.uk

Nicola Benedetti, Leonard Elschenbroich and Jessica Duchon had brunch at Annie's Restaurant, Barnes. <http://www.anniesrestaurant.co.uk>

NICOLA BENEDETTI AND LEONARD ELSCHENBROICH...IN PERSON

If you could play only one composer from now on, who would it be?

NB: Beethoven.

LE: Prokofiev.

What would be your ideal instrument, whether or not you already have it?

NB: I've not found a violin that's made me feel I would drop everything to play it. I enjoy a mix of colourfulness, comfort and ease.

LE: I once tried Yo-Yo Ma's Strad...

If you could change three things about the set-up of the profession or its training, what would they be?

LE: I think they often haven't established the right connection between the performers and the audience. I think what they think the audience wants is not what they really want. I'd like more musicians to be in charge of more of the music world because they know their audiences better than the promoters do.

I would like competitions to be judged not by fellow instrumentalists but by conductors, managers, pianists, etc – the people with whom you make

musical connections. Who cares what a violinist thinks of another violinist? They are never going to need each other.

And I'd like teachers to prepare students better for concert life. When I was 18 I joined Anne-Sophie Mutter's foundation and I learned from her how to deal with nerves, stress, travel, jet-lag and so forth. A lot of people have no help with that.

What do you like to listen to?

NB: Classical and jazz, but I'll listen systematically and go through something like all the Prokofiev symphonies.

LE: I listen to a lot of modern and contemporary music, like Morton Feldman, Boulez and Stockhausen.

Do you think classical music needs to be 'saved'?

LE: I think more and more people are listening to classical music – it's spreading globally and is increasingly available.

NB: I think people will always look for things of profundity and quality, things that speak across time and that have that level of depth. Even if it remains somewhat marginal, I don't think it needs to be 'saved' at all.

You're king/queen for a day: what do you do with your power?

NB: I would attempt to change things in our education system to focus more on internal and spiritual development.

LE: Has a king or queen *got* any power?

What makes you happiest?

Both: There's nothing like giving a good concert!