

Nicola Benedetti interview: ‘It’s hard when you feel you’re doing your part, but others aren’t doing theirs’

As she launches her new album, the star violinist is frustrated at the restrictions on live performance, but is determined to bring music to the masses regardless



Nicola Benedetti at Royal Albert Hall - 21 September 2013 – by Allan Beavis

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Some people quit when faced with lockdown. Others don't. When the pandemic abruptly smothered live music, the violinist Nicola Benedetti threw her considerable energy into finding new ways to connect people online to music and, through that, to one another. Now the Scottish star soloist is preparing for a Prom, where she will perform Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 with the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain and, at last, a real, live audience.

That should make the thrill for the NYOGB youngsters in the Royal Albert Hall even greater. "After a year and a half, with so much cancelled and no opportunity to get together, can you imagine how excited they're going to be?" Benedetti enthuses.

To say that musicians have felt frustrated and dispirited these past months is not saying enough. This summer, sports began to be allowed massive audiences, while theatres and concert halls were hobbled by continued social distancing. Benedetti does not mince her words: "It's difficult when you see the football

with 40,000 to 60,000 people gathering just in official numbers in official venues, never mind millions in the streets, and you look at musicians' restrictions in that context.

“When you feel you're making enormous sacrifices for the sake of your civic duty to other people, you want to know that everyone else is participating in that too. A lot of bad feeling comes when you're doing your part, but the rest of society isn't doing theirs. For people in the live performance industry, it's difficult not to draw those comparisons and feel you're being unfairly penalised.”

Since shooting to fame aged 16, winning the BBC Young Musician of the Year in 2004, Benedetti (who turns 34 this summer) has scarcely taken a break, even during the pandemic. Through July she has been presenting, with her Benedetti Foundation, Baroque Virtual Sessions - a three-week early music summer school online; baroque music is generally agreed to date from between around 1580 to 1750 - for all ages, levels and degrees of interest. It culminates in a new recording, concerts at Battersea Arts Centre in July, and the Edinburgh Festival, where Benedetti is artist-in-residence.

“Baroque is potentially the most joyous, welcoming, vivacious, open-armed music there is,” Benedetti says. “This music was intended to be understood and easily communicable. It combines intensely high-quality musicianship and compositional skill with an absolute mission and a mantra of communication.”

Benedetti has an absolute mission of her own. She is one of Britain's most committed spokespeople for music education, whether running her online violin course, With Nicky, or being 'Big Sister' for Sistema Scotland. Recent months, however, have been thorny for advocates of El Sistema. It originated in Venezuela as a social programme aiming to give disadvantaged children new horizons, motivation and self-discipline through music; over the decades its effectiveness has been widely praised. This year, allegations of sexual and psychological abuse within El Sistema in Venezuela have emerged as some former students spoke out about their experiences.

International Sistema organisations rapidly distanced themselves and Sistema Scotland was one of the first to do so. “Sistema Scotland is a standalone charity and as an organisation there are an infinite number of differences with Venezuela,” Benedetti says.

Nevertheless, she insists that one mustn't throw out the baby with the bathwater. “I do not adhere to the notion of cancelling everything. What all humans bring to anything we create can be good and can be bad. If we analyse our entire history and try to erase everything that is good because there's also something that's bad, I think we need to check ourselves. I don't think it's a healthy direction. It's dangerous and deeply unhelpful to everybody involved. I think this should be able to be said, while separately you are calling out and appropriately prosecuting wrongdoing, in a way equally uncompromising in dealing with any mistreatment of children, or women, or men. Both of those truths need to be able to live alongside each other.”

Refuting simplistic solutions is also key, Benedetti feels, to genuine cultural diversity. “Are we actually trying to get inside the minds and hearts of people who, for instance, grew up where a swing rhythm is a means of protest? Do we have an openness and interest to those artistic manifestations of cultures and peoples? If we don't, perhaps we should be asking ourselves deeper questions: why do we not feel curiosity?”

“What about how the music sounds?” she continues. “Are we actually looking to hear some origins of Ghanaian drumming, for example, not just a generic 'Africa' as if it's a country? Are we looking into the diversity that exists within South America? What about the Baltic countries and eastern Europe? All kinds of areas have unbelievable musical traditions. We are the arts, we are an area of music and we're supposed to

be telling the full gamut of the human story, so we should be hearing it as well as seeing it.”

This is all part of building a contemporary musical life that really connects with today’s audiences and reflects their experience. The African-American composer and trumpeter Wynton Marsalis wrote Benedetti a violin concerto several years ago; and this past season her online premiere with the London Symphony Orchestra of the new concerto by the British composer Mark Simpson revealed music that responded powerfully to the psychological atmosphere we were all encountering during lockdown. “To learn that piece relatively fast and try to do it justice was a challenge and a half,” says Benedetti.

She reckons that when we emerge from the pandemic, music and musical education have a crucial role to play. “I’ve heard politicians in Scotland say their focus in education, coming out of this period, is not to prioritise grade results, but to get people’s spirits and souls back to feeling creative and positive. To hear that in Scotland was incredibly heart-warming. I hope there’ll be the same story for the rest of the country.

“It’s going to be paramount to our success. Dealing with Brexit, we’ll need ingenuity and creativity to solve problems, because a hell of a lot more will be coming our way: logistical issues, getting materials shipped here, all these tariffs and restrictions that we knew were potentially going to be difficult. Enough people voted for it, so we have to be creative in tackling those challenges.

“I’m not saying that singing a song is the answer to everybody’s problems. But for people to problem-solve successfully, they need an open, positive and free mind. The arts can help with that.”

Nicola Benedetti’s new album *Baroque* is released on Decca Classics on July 16. The Benedetti Baroque Orchestra performs eight live concerts at Battersea Arts Centre, July 18-21; bac.org.uk and Baroque Virtual Sessions run online until August 1 at benedettifoundation.org. *Benedetti performs Prokofiev’s Violin Concerto No. 2 at the Proms on 7 August; bbc.co.uk/proms and is artist-in-residence at the Edinburgh Festival, August 14-21; eif.co.uk*