



Stephen Waarts, violinist

**LaScena
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Rising Stars: Stephen Waarts

Paul E. Robinson | *La Scena Musicale* | October 2014

It was a cool and rainy August evening when Stephen Waarts dazzled a near-capacity audience at the 2014 Orford Festival with music by Mozart, Bartók, Beethoven and Ravel. This tall, skinny 18-yearold from the Bay Area demonstrated maturity far beyond his years and a virtuosity that would be the envy of violinists of any age. This young man has been steadily winning international competitions and stands on the verge of a major career.

The Waarts story begins in California. His father is an optical engineer and his mother a computer scientist. There was no music in the family, but it appears that Stephen inherited exceptional skills in mathematics, winning several national prizes. After some years of Suzuki training, he studied with Li Lin at the San Francisco Conservatory and then with Itzhak Perlman. He is currently working with Aaron Rosand at the Curtis Institute.

At the Menuhin International Festival in Austin last March, Waarts sailed through every round and emerged with the top prize. At the winner's concert he played Prokofiev with the Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Giancarlo Guerrero.

In 2010 he won second prize in the junior division of the Menuhin Competition, held that year in Norway, and in 2011 he won first prize at the International Louis Spohr Competition. Last year he finished second at the Montreal International Music Competition.

When I met Waarts, I was struck by his quiet and gentle demeanour. Is there a seething competitive spirit that lurks beneath that shy exterior? "I enter competitions to learn the repertoire, to meet the great musicians on the jury and my fellow competitors," he said. "And I get good feedback. Competitions help me to stay focused and have goals. I try not to think of it as playing against other people. I first think of it as playing a concert and see how it goes from there."

Winning competitions has been good for his career but even more helpful was his success at the Young Concert Artists International Auditions: "I get help with management for the next two years and some performances."

Waarts has an insatiable curiosity about music, already mastering a huge repertoire including 35 concertos. Among them are all the warhorses but also rarities like the *Castelnuovo-Tedesco Violin Concerto "Prophets."*

At his Orford recital Stephen made a strong impression with his performance of Bartók's *Sonata for Violin Solo*. His intonation was impeccable and he effortlessly captured the work's many moods and colours. With Curtis colleague Chelsea Wang, an equally impressive partner at the piano, Waarts gave an amazing interpretation of Ravel's *Sonate*. Again, every note was in tune, the phrasing was idiomatic and the tone quality rich and full. The jazz elements in the slow movement were perfectly realized with just the right touch of humour and melancholy, and the finale was brilliant and exciting.