



Stephen Waarts, *violinist*

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Never Too Young to Take On Beethoven and Bartok

Stephen Waarts Debuts at Merkin Concert Hall

- Anthony Tommasini | *The New York Times* | December 16, 2014

At just 18, the violinist Stephen Waarts has already taken top prizes in competitions and played more than 30 concertos with various orchestras. It's a wonder he has time for his studies at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia.

On Monday night at Merkin Concert Hall, Mr. Waarts, who comes from the San Francisco Bay Area, added another achievement to his résumé by making his recital debut in New York as a winner of the 2013 Young Concert Artists International Auditions. With the excellent young pianist Chelsea Wang, a colleague from Curtis, Mr. Waarts showed himself a technically accomplished and musically insightful artist, though he was most impressive in Bartok's extraordinary Sonata for Solo Violin, completed in 1944, when the composer was fatally ill with leukemia.

When he first appeared onstage, the lanky Mr. Waarts looked like a typically awkward teenager. He became all grace and assurance, though, once he started playing Beethoven's Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 8 in G (Op. 30, No. 3) with Ms. Wang, a lithe, spirited account of an inventive early piece.

Bartok wrote his solo violin sonata on commission from Yehudi Menuhin, who gave the premiere at Carnegie Hall in 1944. This formidable 25-minute work opens with an elaborate movement marked Tempo di Ciaccona, clearly inspired by the awesome Chaconne that concludes Bach's Partita No. 2 for Solo Violin. Mr. Waarts, playing commandingly from memory, balanced passages that evolve in the halting dance idiom of the chaconne with rhapsodic stretches that in this gripping account seemed somberly ruminative. He was comparably inspired in the resolute, intricate fugue, the searching slow movement marked Melodia, and the frenetic finale.

After intermission, Mr. Waarts and Ms. Wang gave a colorful, vibrant performance of Ravel's Sonata in G. The first movement was aptly fluid and dreamy; the jazzy second movement, impish and sly. The breathless perpetual motion finale had both sparkle and intensity. Still, the overall effect was marred by the decision not to open the lid on the piano fully: it was just propped open a few inches. Violinists always worry that their sound will be covered by a piano's during duos. But Ms. Wang showed fine control for dynamics. The piano part in this piece is rich and nuanced. Much detail was lost.

To end, Mr. Waarts played two works that were like programmed encores: a short, sultry one, Ravel's "Pièce en Forme de Habanera," followed by a long, showy one, "Carmen" Fantasy. Franz Waxman's paraphrase of hit tunes from the Bizet opera, originally for violin and orchestra, an unabashed piece of virtuosic display. Mr. Waarts certainly dispatched it brilliantly. But this seemed a lost opportunity to play something more substantial. How about a piece by a living composer?



Young Concert Artists: Stephen Waarts, a student at the Curtis Institute of Music, making his debut in New York at Merkin Concert Hall.