

ChamberFest Cleveland: A chat with violinist Stephen Waarts

by Mike Telin



Still in his mid-twenties, violinist [Stephen Waarts](#) has already amassed an impressive resumé. Among his successes, he was a prizewinner at the 2015 Queen Elisabeth Competition and secured the majority vote of the television audience. In March 2017 he was awarded the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant, and he was winner of the International Classical Music Awards Orchestra Award by the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra in 2019.

One of the few things Waarts has *not* done is to perform at ChamberFest Cleveland. That will change later this week. We reached the friendly violinist by telephone in Brussels

where he was rehearsing for an upcoming recording project.

Mike Telin: We're looking forward to having you at ChamberFest.

Stephen Waarts: Thanks. I know a lot of people who have been part of it and everyone always raves about what a nice environment it is. So I was happy that Roman Rabinovich asked me and I was happy that I could make it. I've never been to Cleveland. I've heard a lot about it and I once played with the Orchestra when they were on tour. So I look forward to being there.

MT: On Thursday you're playing Ravel's Introduction and Allegro and Franck's Piano Trio in f-sharp. What are your thoughts about these pieces?

SW: The Ravel is well-orchestrated and very colorful. I haven't had a chance to play many works with harp and I'm sure that Sivan knows so much more about the piece than I do, but I am looking forward to playing it.

And honestly, I was only vaguely aware of the Franck. I've never played it but it's an ambitious, beautiful work. There are many well-known pieces by Franck so it's nice to play something that is less common.

On Saturday I'm playing a bunch of solo violin pieces during the prelude concert — the Biber *Passacaglia*, Ysaÿe's *Sonata No. 5*, and a sonata by Sandor Veress, who is a not very well-known Hungarian composer between Bartók and Ligeti. The solo violin pieces were my choice and I like them all very much. I know the Ysaÿe very well but the Veress sonata is the first piece I ever played by him. I've done it a couple of times and I think it deserves to be heard, so I'm happy the people in Cleveland were open to the idea.

And on Sunday at the outdoor concert I'm playing the Saint-Saëns *Fantaisie* with Sivan, and that will be a lot of fun.

MT: Changing topics, you're studying at the Kronberg Academy. Why was that the right fit for you?

SW: I was about to graduate from Curtis and I wanted to continue studying somewhere. And I wanted a change so kind of on a whim I decided to go to Germany. I imagined that I would stay for a couple of years but now it's been six.

But what drew me to Kronberg was the unique concept of the institution. I had a masterclass with the teacher I study with, Mihaela Martin, and I thought that she would give me a lot.

MT: I saw a Kronberg Academy video. You said that you are now smarter about studying without the violin than you were earlier. Could you expand on that?

SW: I think that studying without the instrument is something that isn't emphasized enough in violin lessons. I learned more about it from masterclasses with pianists or even my harmony and theory lessons — studying the whole score for example. I'm also lucky that I learned piano as a kid so when I hear a new piece I'll go to the piano and play it because you can understand the harmonies much better. So it's not just looking at the violin part, but looking at the entire score, and for that you don't need the violin — you can do that when you're on a plane or something.

Given the opportunity, I like to play a little bit on the piano and then go back to the violin and do a mix like that. I think that is the most useful way to learn.

MT: In that same video you talked about a person's concept of tone or sound.

SW: Everybody has their concept of sound, and I'm not sure exactly where that comes from. Listening to other players or to your teacher, of course, but in part, I think it is something you're born with. It is hard to explain. But I was lucky to study with teachers who all had amazing sounds.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 27, 2022.

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