



New Artist of the Month: Sebastian Bäverstam

By Dennis D. Rooney

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NEW YORK -- Not many three-year-olds would ask their Moms for a cello, but Sebastian Bäverstam did, one day from the back seat of the family car. It was shortly after his first encounter with the instrument, at a church concert in his hometown of Newton, MA. "I remember being very young and very excited by the cello. That has never really changed," he said in a recent telephone interview.

I first heard Bäverstam in April, performing at Weill Recital Hall as part of his prize for winning the 2009 Concert Artists Guild International Competition. At age 22, his playing suggests the emergence of a mature artist. Particularly striking was the Kodály Sonata for Solo Cello, Op. 8, played with consummate instrumental mastery yet complete responsiveness to its musical character (in particular the middle Adagio). The work's craggy qualities emerged without any tonal roughness or sense of struggle. His sound was slightly *secco*, especially in the lower register, yet perfectly suited to the small size of the venue.

"I remember listening to recordings of the piece when I was 12 and 13," he told me. "I was determined to play it but it had to wait until my freshman year at the Conservatory. I would work on it a bit and then let it rest for a while." The piece calls for a *scordatura* tuning, so the notes on the printed page do not match the pitches that actually sound. Since Bäverstam has perfect pitch, reading directly from the page, he says, was wholly confusing. "I couldn't really practice it until I had it memorized."

Growing up in a household of amateur musicians, encouraged by his mother, a pianist, and his older sister, a violinist, young Sebastian progressed quickly under his first teacher, Debbie Thompson. He performed his first full recital at age six, at Harvard University, and his first concerto at age seven, with the Salem Philharmonic, a local community ensemble.

When he was ten, his teacher suggested he audition for National Public Radio's "From the Top"; he has since appeared on the show a number of times, both in its radio and PBS-TV iterations. One of the latter was a documentary filmed in Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall, in which he performed several solo pieces as well as the Beethoven Triple Concerto with the New England Conservatory Preparatory Division's Youth Philharmonic Orchestra. Bäverstam has also played on international Voice of America broadcasts, and is involved in assorted outreach programs in elementary and middle schools. "Basically, I show the students what it's like to play an instrument that most of them have never even seen before," he says.

As the young cellist began to attract attention in the northeast, he headed off to masterclasses and performances on his summer breaks from school, taking in the Aspen Music Festival, the Banff Centre in Canada, the Verbier Festival Academy, the International Music Academy of Switzerland, directed by Seiji Ozawa, and others.

He was still in high school when he started playing the concerto circuit, performing with the Albany Symphony Orchestra, Boston Civic Symphony, Brockton Symphony Orchestra, Concord Symphony Orchestra and the Chernikov Symphony Orchestra, among others. He has also toured China, Venezuela and Brazil as soloist with NEC's Youth Philharmonic Orchestra under Benjamin Zander.

Bäverstam took first prize in the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Concerto Competition in 2006, and several months later performed the Shostakovich First Concerto with the BSO in Symphony Hall. A year later he began studies at the New England Conservatory of Music under renowned cellist Paul Katz, whom, he says, was "the right teacher at the right time," because he connected the young Sebastian to the realities of professionalism. "He didn't let me get away with making up my own technique, anymore" laughs Bäverstam. The young cellist is still finishing his undergraduate degree at NEC, having had to take time off in the last several years to play concerts. His first year there, he was called upon to substitute for Lynn Harrell with the Cape Cod Symphony on six hours notice. His performance of the Schumann Concerto was praised in the press for its "insightful musicianship and poetic feeling."

Bäverstam's cello, an 1812 Fiori, was a gift from his grandfather. "He loved music passionately. His mother was a very talented pianist but was discouraged from performing in public. He wanted me to have this instrument and gave it to me before he died." Bäverstam bought his bow with the \$2,000 he made playing for a Bose commercial.

This summer will mainly be devoted to study and practice, in preparation for his final year as an undergraduate. He'll be playing Tchaikovsky's "Rococo" Variations with the Landmark Symphony, conducted by his high school teacher, retired BSO cellist Ronald Feldman. There are also projects with two local composers. "I've had a lot of fun getting together with a drummer friend and improvising on the cello," he says, adding that he uses a pickup to counterbalance the drums. "And I'm going to be in New York this summer playing the Bach Suites for a group of dancers that a choreographer friend is working with."

Clearly, this is a young man on the move. And with the ambition to back up the talent, he's headed for a major career in the not-too-distant future.