

## **Self-portrait of Bartók as a young artist**

By József Kling (in "Figaro") 04 05 2014

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"Grace, uninhibited childlike spontaneity, artistic temperament, powerful musicality and technical bravura" were the words written about Stefi Geyer (1888-1956). A "wunderkind", she hypnotised Europe and the USA as a teenage violinist at the beginning of the XXth century – and she hypnotised Bartók, who painted her musical portrait. The playing of half-Hungarian Gwendolyn Masin befits the adjectives used to describe the young Geyer. Last month, she interpreted, twice in succession, Bartók's violin concerto, first at the MüPa (Művészetek Palotája - Palace of Arts) in Budapest with Teddy Abrams (conductor) and the MÁV Symphony Orchestra; later in Szombathely with Robert Houlihan (conductor) and the Savaria Symphony Orchestra in the Bartók Terem.

The 26-year-old Bartók met 18-year-old wunderkind, Stefi Geyer in 1906 during a concert. After the initial meeting they met a few more times but, bar a summer holiday spent together, their relationship was expressed mainly through their correspondence.

Bartók tried to convey his sentiments by explaining his liberal universal fantasies and hopes, which frightened rather than seduced the conventionally conservative, very religious young girl.

After the break-up, the composer tried to reveal his feelings by composing the portrait of Stefi.

He only succeeded in composing two movements. According to Bartók, the real portrait of the unwelcoming, uninterested girl could only have been expressed with "ugly music". Bartók did write this "ugly music" in the cycle of the 14 Bagatelles for piano. The 13<sup>th</sup> piece of the cycle entitled "My lover is dancing" contains the Geyer Stefi chord: D-F sharp-A-C sharp.

According to hearsay Stefi Geyer admitted that the chord is the leitmotif that expresses their break up.

When Gwendolyn glides on to the podium in her dark dress, barefoot, you can feel a cold wind sweep through the shocked public. The

message behind the barefoot appearance is obviously not a publicity trick or a gesture to irritate the mentality of the traditionalists. It would risk being exactly that, were it not that this artist's playing proves to be down to earth – she is a natural.

Listening to Gwendolyn Masin's rich vibrato, a friend of mine who plays violin says: "She is a *Musician Animal*. This is absolutely not meant as a derogatory remark. She plays exactly as she feels." Indeed, she stands on the MüPa stage like a lonely musical tree, creating the sound of nature.

In the first movement, the soloist brings us the message of intimacy and passion that reveal Bartók's feelings with natural flow, as dictated by the laws of nature.

Unfortunately the young conductor and the orchestra do not form a forest around her. They are only background decoration, unable to follow the soloist into the deeper layers of nature.

Gwendolyn's playing walks the listener through the long road of acceptance of that which cannot be changed. In the opening phrase the sound still vacillates. This new feeling unknown as of yet, Gwendolyn's opening phrase making us feel the hesitation. All this turning into the acceptance of the inevitability of fate as if love only finds its true meaning once it is refused. The portrait, of course, depicts Bartók's feelings rather than those of Stefi.

In the second movement's virtuoso passages we hear a lot of humour and playfulness but in Gwendolyn's very original interpretation we hear above all Bartók's sense of irony towards his own overheated feelings.

In her pre-concert talk, Gwendolyn mentioned that she feels as if Bartók were a part of her extended family. A well-founded reason considering that her parents got to know each other as students in Brussels in the class of violinist André Gertler, who performed with Bartók between 1925-1938 in Belgium.