

# Peeling the parameters of the grand delusion

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In Love's Delusion, an accessible 'collage' of media and artists, literature and music share the stage as equals, writes **Christine Madden**



We've all been deluded by love. Many artists fashion their work out of this deceptive haze that spares no one in its intensity and pain. It's a subject that never fails to find resonance in the public, partly because passion demands powerful expression, partly because everyone has experienced this the addictive drug that no one ever fully stops craving.

A promising topic, then, with which to build an audience for a fresh mix of art forms. Love's Delusion, a collaboration of artists and media allows both literature and music to fill the stage as equals, each complementing the other, with neither present purely as back-up. Conceived by violinist Gwendolyn Masin, the production includes the talents of director Paddy Kelly, pianist Julia Bartha and actors Donal Courtney and John O'Donoghue.

Masin's programme brings together works by writers Marcel Proust and Leo Tolstoy with those of César Franck and Ludwig van Beethoven. This "collage", as she describes it, investigates our willingness to allow passion to cloud our reason, but also sets out particularly to make classical music and literature more accessible to a broader public.

"I remember being 16 and looking at Proust and thinking, 'I'll never be able to understand this'," Masin recalls. "And when I was young and learning music, I had to find something to hold onto in order to grasp the meaning of the music for my interpretation." Masin learned the violin under the tutelage of her mother, the respected violin teacher Maria Keleman, and her father Ronald Masin, professor of music at DIT, where she had been accepted to the Conservatory of Music and Drama at the age of 10. She has continued her studies in Switzerland at conservatories in Berne and Zurich, where she is currently completing her postgraduate studies. While in Switzerland, Masin made the acquaintance of the award-winning pianist Julia Bartha, who has worked with pianist John O'Connor, among others.

Bartha's particular interest in combining literature and music brought her into collaboration with theatre practitioners such as Cornelia Froboess and Rainer Piwek at the acclaimed Thalia Theater in Hamburg. The practice of combining the two forms, she says, remains popular in Germany, where she was involved in similar programmes for the Year of Goethe in 1999. "It goes back to the idea of the 19th century Melodram," Bartha says. Although sounding similar, it bears little connection with what we would recognise as a melodrama. "Someone recites a frightening, bizarre or eccentric story," she explains, "which would be set to music. It would be spoken, declaimed, not sung." She had worked on similar projects setting, for example, texts by the poet Heinrich Heine to Schumann's Waldstücke and Nachtstücke.

Her background makes her an ideal working partner for Masin's project. "The idea of combining music and literature isn't strictly new, but at the moment it's new again, because it hasn't really been done here for so long." Similarly, "the material isn't new" - Proust's Remembrance of Time Past with Franck's Sonata for Violin and Piano in A major, and Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata with Tolstoy's novella of the same name - "but the combination is. Actually, I don't know why nobody's ever put them together before." The Kreutzer Sonata in particular inspired a series of spin-offs. Beethoven's famous work inspired Tolstoy's novella, which in turn inspired Janacek's piano trio and first string quartet, as well as a painting by René Prinet, which illustrated the narrator's "delusion" in Tolstoy's work (and which went on to get a mention in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita).

The four pieces chosen by Masin for her programme particularly reflect the artistic crossover between music and literature. Tolstoy wrote the Kreutzer Sonata through the voice of the husband of a woman who takes up the piano again. He becomes jealous of her music, and of her collaboration with a violinist, and imagines an affair between them. His delusion reaches a peak when they perform together Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata. In Proust's work, Masin concentrates on Swann's Way, in which Swann's involvement with Odette develops from indifference to obsession and returns to indifference "through the prism of music", she says. "It's like a perfume, it can remind you vividly of something that happened years ago."

In the programme, text and music will alternate but never clearly separate from each other. "We don't perform them at the same time, one on top of the other; that would be a cacophony, and detract from both," says Masin. "The performance takes place in 'real time', with the actor on stage while the music is playing and vice versa." Through their interplay, "you get a deeper understanding of both", explains Bartha. "With the music alone, the imagination isn't engaged in the same way. If you listen to it, and then discover the music in the story, it then has a completely different effect on you." Masin especially hopes that Love's Delusion will offer young people a path into classical music. "They don't get as excited about classical music. And it has nothing to do with education, we just live in a different age. It isn't presented in an accessible way." She cites the example of film music, and how people who aren't interested in classical music will buy and avidly listen to film soundtracks that borrow heavily from that genre. Through the medium of film, they can come to understand the evocative power of that kind of music.

Both musicians move on to further cross-genre projects after this. Bartha will return to Germany to perform in a three-part homage to Oscar Wilde for his 150th birthday celebration. This project will add dance to the mix of literature and music.

And Masin already has "six other ideas in the bag". The motif of Satan, for example, frequently recurs in music and literature, from the many versions of Faust through Camille Saint-Saëns's Danse Macabre to Nicolò Paganini, of whom people believed he had sold his soul to the devil in order to play the violin in his frenetic, passionate way.

Deluded or not, passion underlies the works in Masin's programme, as well as any artistic endeavour. "Most stories are about love in one way or another," she says. It takes a matching amount of love - and devotion, not delusion - to nurture and develop them for the stage.