

The Arts

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Tomorrow Artist John Walker – never fashionable but does it his way

The art of making music fun



ARMINTHA WALLACE

Playing music isn't actually that difficult, maintains violinist and teacher Gwendolyn Masin, it's making music that's hard

LEARNING TO PLAY a musical instrument can be a bit of a chore. But if you're four years old and your music lessons involve chasing up and down a tree with five hungry monkeys, landing a Boeing 707 without injuring any of the passengers, walking on your hands and a spot of juggling... well, that's a different story altogether. Fun is the starting point of a new illustrated music tutor called *Michaela's Music House*. Based around the musical adventures of the eponymous four-year-old Michaela, its pages fairly bubble and crackle with mischief; which, its author Gwendolyn Masin insists, is the key to getting children engaged and enthused.

"Like most four-year-olds, Michaela is curious and cheeky and funny," Masin says. She is also, sometimes, baffled or bored or unwilling to practice. Rather than ignoring or glossing over such responses, the book recognises them as a normal, natural part of an extended and complex learning process – and suggests coping strategies that will help to minimise their disruptive effect.

Masin looks far too young to be an experienced violin teacher but has, in a way, been born and bred to the task. She comes from a family of pedagogues – her grandmother and great-grandmother taught in Hungary and her parents run the Young European Strings violin school in Dublin. A gifted young soloist who made her debut in Budapest at the age of five

and gave a recital at the National Concert Hall in Dublin when she was 11, Masin has been teaching herself since she was a teenager. She has also studied with some of the most acute musical minds of our time.

"I have a strong interest in the academic side of teaching, and have read a lot of the tuition material that's currently available," she explains. "And what I've realised is that while the books that are out there are wonderful and interesting, they're no longer very relevant to the world that we actually live in. They're not relevant to children – and they're certainly not relevant to their parents."

"I teach three-year-olds and I teach 30-year-olds. And what I've noticed over and over again – and it doesn't matter what country I'm in, or what language I'm communicating in – is that parents very much want to assist their children. Especially young children. But sometimes they don't know how to. So what happens after a while is, the children don't feel supported, because no one at home is making the learning process fun. So they just stop."

Masin's own love of literature since childhood has clearly fed straight into *Michaela's Music House*. "I've always been surrounded by elements of imagination and fantasy," she says. "I'm fascinated by games and stories and fairy tales."

Not that she's willing to compromise when it comes to high standards or hard work; but there's a way of approaching the study of an instrument, she maintains, which makes the hard work worthwhile. "If I'm teaching you, no matter what age you are," she says, "I will find out what interests you and try to find metaphors which will help you to feel a certain way. And when I do that, I'll hear it immediately in the sound you produce."

Masin's book has a strikingly young, contemporary vibe. This, she explains, is because it came together very much as a team effort – and because the other members of her team are close friends.

"The illustrator, Colm Mac Athlaioich, has been a friend of mine since we were children," she says. "The calligraphy was done by Rhea Matter, another friend from Bern. She's a mountain climber, she's a teacher, she's a violinist and she's also an inventor. In her apartment she has railway tracks as candelabras, shower nozzles as light fixtures. Her bed is held together by tennis balls that she's pulled together with wires – and it's a really comfortable bed, by the way – and she has very good taste so the whole thing is really funky. She used to send me postcards from her holidays and I was fascinated by her handwriting. I'd never seen anything like it."

MASIN'S CAREER HAS seen her settle in Switzerland, where she works with a fistful of chamber orchestras and contemporary musicians. She also performs regularly both as a soloist and in ensembles. "I could live a very satisfying, fulfilled life just playing," she says. "I love music – the process of rehearsing, the process of playing, meeting people and sharing ideas." Her next big project in Ireland will be the premiere of a violin concerto written for her by the composer John Buckley.

"It's his first violin concerto and I feel very privileged to be the person that he's written it for. I received the music some time ago and in September I'll hear when the premiere will be. It's extremely beautiful. The orchestration is like a dream, a reverie – a little bit French in fla-



genre, actually – and I can't wait to play it."

She is, however, eclectic in her interests and positively messianic in her ambition to bring music of all kinds to people of all musical tastes and none. "I don't buy this idea of classical music being elitist and specialist," she says. "I actually think that classical music is much more rock'n'roll than anybody thinks it is." And pop music – certainly contemporary pop at its most commercial – is much less so.

"In pop music now you have to deliver a number of elements and if you don't deliver them, go home. Forget it. Everything I do is about engaging the audience – whether it's when I play, or when I programme."

To this end she has set up her own festival in Switzerland, the Gaia Chamber Music Festival – and a similar musical modus operandi applies to her programming for the Carrick Water Music Festival in Carrick-on-Shannon, for which she has been artistic director since 2007. "Instead of focusing just on classical music I decided to try and find genres – world music, jazz, whatever – which would somehow make sense together. So that people who would have had no experience of one or other

Gwendolyn Masin, author of *Michaela's Music House: The Magic of the Violin*, a new illustrated music tutor based around the musical adventures of a curious, cheeky and funny four-year-old.

Photograph: Marco Borggreve

genre can come in and follow through from one concert to the next.

"I have great fun putting together artists who would otherwise never play together – and letting them be together for a while," she explains. "So then what they play is nothing like what you've heard before. They're relaxed, they're having fun, they're free of all the chains that the so-called industry puts upon them."

At the other end of the musical spectrum, *Michaela's Music House* aims to offer that same freedom to children who are just setting out on a musical path.

"I'm not interested in saying, 'This is how I teach – you must follow this, and this alone because it's the Holy Grail,'" she says. "Playing an instrument is not actually that hard. It's not a mystery at all. Making music – that's where the magic is. And that magic, you can't put into words. I haven't tried to write about making music. I don't know if I could. I've tried to write about the mechanics of making music in such a way that it no longer appears mechanical. You hear so many stories of people who give up the study of an instrument. But you also hear all these stories of people who, at the age of 30, take up those instruments again. And I think, 'My God. What a waste of years.'"

Michaela's Music House: The Magic of the Violin is published by Muller & Schade and is available from Opus 11 at www.opus2.ie, price €42

Music floats on the Shannon at Carrick festival

THE RIVER IS the thing in Carrick-on-Shannon, so it's no surprise that the county town of Leitrim should include water in the title of its annual summer festival. And this year the Carrick Water Music Festival celebrates its fifth anniversary with a programme that spans all musical genres from trad to opera, jazz to klezmer.

"People from the town came together to try to create something exciting for the region during the summer," says Alan Shanley, one of the festival organisers. "There are about 20 people on the committee, all in a voluntary capacity." Many are shop owners, but all sorts of people are involved, giving the festival a genuinely local flavour. "We're trying to bring as much business into the region as we can – not just to Carrick town, but to the surrounding area as well."

Cruise boats which ply between the Shannon's benignly broad banks play a central role in the atmosphere of this picturesque riverside town, and the festival venues also have something of a riverside flavour. It all adds, says Shanley, to the ambience.

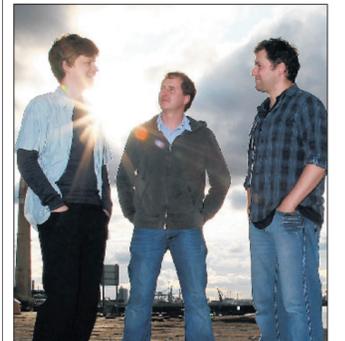
"The main venue is The Dock arts centre, which has a capacity of about 150," he says. "It's in a really old house in the town which has been restored. It also has a cafe and craft shop – so it's one of those cool, chic little theatres with a lot of good gigs around the town."

The Landmark and Bush hotels have also got in on the festival act, as has the aptly-named *Moon River*. "It's a cruise ship on the river," Shanley explains. "They have a different musician every Saturday, so the idea is that people come on board, have a few drinks and listen to the music. That's always a popular one because of the water element of it." The festival programme is also, however, uncommonly attractive, ranging from a classical violin-and-guitar recital by Redmond O'Toole and Elizabeth Cooney (August 5th, 8.30pm) to a performance of Handel's *Xerxes* in the composer's 250th anniversary year, courtesy of Opera Theatre Company's Young Associate Artists (August 8th, 8.30pm). The young Irish trio Organics (below) will play on August 7th, while the six-piece Slovak Festival Orchestra, conducted by Vladimir Jablakov, will play at the Bush Hotel on August 9th at 2.30pm.

"This year in particular we're very conscious of the recession and so we're offering good value and attractive events for families," says Shanley. "Our most expensive tickets are €30 – that's for the opera – but tickets for some events are only €5." They have also scheduled a number of free events, including the Wassa Wassa drum workshop (August 7th, 2pm) and an I Can Sing workshop (August 8th, 11am). "You don't need any experience for these – just plenty of enthusiasm," says Shanley.

You do, however, need to pre-register because space is limited. This is easily done by following the links on the website or contacting The Dock arts centre directly on 071-9650828.

The Carrick Water Music Festival runs from August 4th to 9th. For further information, call 071-9650828 or see carrickwatermusic.com



Tips for reluctant violinists

When teaching young children, words such as "relax" or "focus" are out of bounds, since most four-year-olds have no idea how to consciously do either. To get around these difficulties, *Michaela's Music House* uses visual imagery which is intended to connect tiny brains to tiny fingers in an instinctive, immediate way. To fix a squeaky, watery sound, for instance, you need to call in the Fat Fairy. She has a big, fat bum, and she sits right in

the middle of the bow. The student is asked to imagine pulling the bow across the strings with the extra weight of the fairy sitting on it – resulting in a fuller, rounder sound. To practice articulation, the bow is transformed into a banana tree and the five fingers into five hungry monkeys. They climb up the bow in search of food. Climbing back down again is, of course, more difficult. Why? Because the monkeys have full tummies, duh...

Lots for the local collector in Boyle



AIDAN DUNNE
VISUAL ARTS

'ARED SEAL attached to work indicates that the work has been sold." So reads the explanatory note in the catalogue for the Boyle Arts Festival's 20th exhibition. And, due in no small measure to the efforts of the show's curator (though he doesn't describe himself in those terms), Fergus Ahern, there were many red seals in evidence just prior to the official opening of the festival.

Over the years Ahern has built up a local art-buying audience for the event, and, while he acknowledges that things are much more difficult this year, he is happy that work, particularly work at the lower end of the broad price range, is selling. As he notes, as well, many of the artists have priced their work with the current economic

climate in mind.

Ahern is a collector himself. He has that distinctive passion for finding and acquiring something that surprises and intrigues him, and his willingness to explore art that is new to him has been reflected in the evolving shape of the annual exhibition. It's also contributed to a remarkable civic undertaking in the form of the now-extensive Boyle Art Collection (selected works from which are usually on view at King House).

The exhibition is a sprawling affair, not unlike the RHA Annual show in its way. It's populist to a degree, partly by virtue of its sheer variety. The emphasis is on traditional media, though photography has gained a secure foothold. Sculpture, in the conventional sense of three-dimensional representations in bronze and other materials, always features prominently, which is rare enough these days.

One could argue that the show is too populist and not unduly challenging, but that is not quite fair. Within its parameters, there is certainly challenging work on view, and the audience is not the specialist art world one that accounts for the attendance at

many contemporary exhibitions, but much more broadly based, which is great.

What's also noticeable is that artists make a real effort for Boyle, because the festival has a good reputation. As with the RHA, work is more or less crammed in, but it's somehow okay in the context.

Sculptor Sarturio Alonso strikes an exuberant note with two quite different pieces. One is a three-dimensional photographic head of John Carroll. It greets you as you enter King House and it's quite striking, even disturbing in its hyper-real strangeness. Another, *The Useful Elm*, is a witty exposition of the uses of elm wood in which various objects explode out from a large-scale, turned-wood pepper pot.

In quite a different vein, Ellis O'Connell shows two beautiful cast bronzes, each displaying her impeccable sense of form and finish.

Barrie Cooke habitually makes small oil studies of subjects that later appear in full-size paintings, and, though he often puts the studies to one side (not because he doesn't value them but because he uses them as references), they don't make it into his exhibitions.



Here he shows two superb little studies made at Cill Raillig in 2006. As with Constable, his initial, to some extent preparatory, works have a quality of lively spontaneity that is exceptional. The one Basil Blackshaw included, *Man Waiting*, is also a small piece that is much more substantial than its modest scale might suggest.

IF YOU ARE a fan of painting, there's lots of good stuff in Boyle. Sahoko Blake shows a big, moody landscape, *Winter, Croghan Hill, Co Offaly*, in her intricately

Swirling: (from left) Patricia Burns, *The Glen*; Ellis O'Connell, *Spiral 1*



detailed style – a style that recalls Jacqueline Stanley with its underpinning of solid drawing.

James Allen continues his dialogue with the sea in two thoughtful, understated pieces. Clifford Collie is an Irish painter based in Spain. He produces richly atmospheric, smouldering, landscape-based studies. Maighread Tobin, perhaps better known as a sculptor, has been painting for some time to good effect, and her scoured, textural accounts of the Burren are good.

Graham Gingles shows a large painting rather than the boxes he

is usually identified with. It's a view of a forest, but not a straightforward one; it's charged with ambiguity and mystery, as we might expect of Gingles. Diane Henshaw plays with chance and pattern in her likeable, colourful improvisations. Angela Hackett's work is painterly in the best sense, as is that of Angie Grimes, Jonathan Hunter and Alison Pilkington.

Patricia Burns is a painter with a very distinctive vision, muted and unshowy but tremendously atmospheric in evoking place. For abstraction, Charles Tyrrell and

Makiko Nakamura cannot be bettered, and KK Godsee is also noteworthy.

Among the printmakers, the meticulous realism of Jennifer Cunningham's beautifully drawn work gives us insight into the emotional lives of the girls she depicts. There's an allegorical quality to Cora Cummins's evocations of islands and voyages, and textural subtlety in Louise Meade's etchings. Jenny Spain, Lars Nyberg, James McCreary, Mary-Louise Martin and Yoshiharu Mishio also ensure that print is strongly represented. Philip Moss is a Donegal-based painter whose big, bold, impeccably made realist works push simple ideas to extremes. His *Now We Are Mature* contradicts its title with its brash, toy-like appeal.

Simon English shows particularly good works continuing his exploration of ideas of place, identity and alienation.

All of this is but an indication of what there is to see. Many other artists show outstanding pieces – David Crone, Marc Reilly, Geraldine O'Neill, Barbara Freeman, Jim Savage, Sinead Ni Mhaonaigh, Geraldine O'Reilly, Jack Donovan, Cara Thorpe, Jennifer Trouton and Pat McAllister included. More than enough to make the exhibition an important event in itself – not just a round-up of things already seen elsewhere, but a significant showcase for major new work. See it if you get the chance.

Boyle Arts Festival 20th Exhibition, King House, Boyle until July 21. 071-9663885