



CLASSICAL MUSIC NEWS

Violinist Gwendolyn Masin on the Music & Life of Poldowski

Irene Régine Wieniawska, also known as Poldowski, was the daughter of Henryk Wieniawski

The Violin Channel recently sat down with violinist Gwendolyn Masin to learn more about the lesser-known female composer and pianist, Poldowski. Poldowski was the professional pseudonym of Irene Régine Wieniawski, the daughter of the Polish violinist and composer Henryk Wieniawski.

On her album, *Legends*, Masin explores the music of Poldowski in an effort to shed light on the composer's work and style. Poldowski's *Tango* can be heard below, along with an interview with Masin about the composer:

Who was Poldowski? What is her family background?

The discovery and recording of Poldowski's „Tango“ stems from a programme I created for my music festival in Switzerland called „GAIA“. The theme of the festival centres around musical families. A particular programme focuses on one of the violin world's great all-rounders, namely Henryk Wieniawski. What I did not know before conceptualising the programme was that Henryk wasn't the only famous musician in his family. The Polish Wieniawski family's musicality stemmed from its matriarch, mother of Henryk and his brother, the pianist and composer Józef: Regina Wolff, a professionally trained pianist and sister of pianist Edouard Wolff. Irene Wieniawska, aka Poldowski, was Henryk's daughter. Sadly, Henryk died six weeks before she was born. She was christened Régine after her paternal grandmother and, after moving to London with her mother, Isabella Hampton, married Sir Aubrey Dean Paul.

What was her musical training?

Aspects of Poldowski's biography are shrouded in mystery; she claimed to have studied at the Brussels Conservatory, but no record of her time there survives. In the 1920s she led a colourful life in London, entertaining guests including the conductor Eugène Goossens and fellow composers Peter Warlock and George Gershwin.

Sir Henry Wood considered Poldowski to have “exceptional talent” and conducted the premiere of her orchestral *Nocturne* at the 1912 Proms. Poldowski said of her compositional style that she was “always restless and dissatisfied under any scholastic influence”, but she was particularly drawn to French composers such as Debussy, Ravel and Fauré, and to the poetry of Verlaine.

What was her composition style like?

For me, Poldowski's language is instantly recognisable, taking ownership of an authentic signature, a creation of her own making, more contemporary than her father and uncle. Irène's works carry the sculpted edge of ironic humour, of someone observing and questioning how things unfold, of a critical thinker. Tellingly, she chose a surname's masculine ending rather than a feminine one, as if to emphasise her point.

Why the pseudonym?

Irene felt burdened by her father's legacy and adopted a masculine-sounding pseudonym – one of several versions of her name used at various times – to escape the association. The fact that she took a male alias lends an indication of how she felt about the reception of women's oeuvres in contrast to men's.

How did you discover her? What drew you to her music?

Research for my festival has me searching for treasure all over the world. In the case of Poldowski, I travelled to Brussels to visit libraries, the conservatoire and the Ysaÿe Foundation. I was tracing a narrative that had its origins here. This thread started with one of the Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles' earliest representatives, Henryk Wieniawski and was followed by his student Eugène Ysaÿe, and Ysaÿe's student, George Enescu. As I followed the trail of violinist after violinist, I suddenly discovered a name in the lineage that was not connected directly to the Conservatoire – that of a certain “Poldowski”. Poldowski was the professional pseudonym of Belgian-born Irène Régine Wieniawski.

When I first leafed through her music, I discovered songs, piano works, and orchestral pieces, and finally stumbled upon works for violin and piano. I believe the *Tango* is not part of the staple repertoire for the same reasons that classical musicians as a community have only begun performing works by women composers with greater regularity in the past decade or so. As a performer, when discussing my choices

of repertoire with other professionals, I felt that within the world of string playing, there was an air of dismissal towards music by female composers – their works were not seen as equally complex, grand, sweeping or athletic as their male counterparts. To understand this fully, it is helpful to remember that female musicians, for a very long time, were not given the tools to dream of writing large orchestral works or opera; employment for female composers, if there was any, was often limited to teaching children, conducting choirs, or assisting their male counterparts.

Poldowski lays those suppositions to rest with her *Tango*, which is fiendishly difficult – it demands greater in part even than those of her father's music – and packs a bunch of ideas into a deliciously crunchy four minutes of music. The piece opens with arresting piano chords and muscular violin writing before the tango proper – Argentine in flavour. The violin seems to be possessed by different voices: that sinewy, gruff opening manner and a higher-pitched, soaring lyricism in answer – an equality of dialogue and status that Poldowski enjoyed to some extent in her lifetime, but which her reputation deserves still.

Why is it important to you to play the music of lesser-known composers?

In the past, I have heard it said that if a piece or composer is unknown, the reason for that is that their music was not good enough to stand the test of time in comparison to their peers. Take for example the music of Ferdinand Ries or Johann Nepomuk Hummel, in juxtaposition to that of Ludwig van Beethoven, or the piano compositions of Nikolai Medtner overshadowed in his lifetime by those of Sergei Rachmaninov and Alexander Scriabin.

I see an unfortunate relationship with this way of thinking and the neglect that works of female composers, composers of colour, composers from minorities, from the LGBTQ+ community, and so on, have suffered — works unknown, not worthy of recognition, not worth of discovery. In the words of Nadia Boulanger, “an artist and their music can never be more or less than they are as a human being”. Much of the music I consider neglected is only in that state because of societal norms of the past, and the promotion of some composers over others.

Part of what I love about being a musical artist is that we can draw attention to things that happen, now or in the past. Artists are critical observers of our time. We can offer significant contributions to the public within the framework of their means of expression, full of intention and with the potential of great impact on audiences and public awareness.

What was it like recording the Tango?

Recording the *Tango* was a lot of fun. We had the opportunity to be one of the final productions at the Swiss National Broadcasting Association's Brunnenhof studio in Zurich before its renovation, which gave the whole process an air of nostalgic melancholy. There were so many stories of incredible musicians recording and performing in that hall. The engineers were recounting their memories of working there for decades, and a peek at the schedule of that season alone bore a swoon-inducing amount of musicians whom I greatly admire. At the same time, we were the first to record a work of Poldowski there, and we had very little time to do so. If I remember correctly, we played it through a few times, and that was it. So those four minutes of music, laden with musical ideas, were recorded in a hall layered with historical performances, many of which can't be known, but can somehow be felt. It seemed fitting.

What is one thing you'd like listeners to take away with them after listening to the recording?

I hope that the brilliance of the piece stops people in their tracks. From the opening call to the attention of the piano's chords, followed by a jump on the violin into the *n*th position in the first bars, to the cheekiness, irony, and command to centre the listener's focus. Here is a composer who understands how to tell a good story without losing integrity, who understands how to be uncompromising, bold and unafraid when integrating unusual harmonies not commonly used in encore-length pieces, and who never loses the conviction of her own voice along the way. That is by no means an easy thing to do and in my eyes, these are qualities to aspire to, not just for women in classical music, but for people everywhere.

By The Violin Channel