

Versatility [interview with Gwendolyn Masin]

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Gwendolyn Masin is a well-known concert violinist. I know that she is also widely known as a music teacher and as an organizer of musical life. What can be called the word "versatility", if not this? So when the opportunity arose, I decided to use it and ask the artist a few questions.

Władysław Rokiciński: Nowadays, you are a famous and valued violinist. And what were the beginnings? What mainly shaped you musically in your childhood? I know that you started your musical education very early.

Gwendolyn Masin: My childhood was filled with music – both my parents are string instrumentalists and my grandmother was a pianist. Enamoured by her playing, I started playing the piano aged 3, and later the violin aged 5. Although I loved the piano, I couldn't move all of my body while playing, the chair forces the player into a limited range of movement. I had a phase of playing the cello and although I adore the sound of the instrument and relish playing it, the chair posed the same restrictions. I found that with the violin, I could even dance whilst playing and so it became the instrument to which I find most affinity.

And you used to travel a lot. Already from childhood. Adults generally like to travel, they consider it interesting and enriching. And what did the child whom you were then think of that?

I began traveling as an infant with family outings to my mother's homeland of Hungary. Later, we moved between different countries including South Africa, the Netherlands, and Ireland. I began travelling on my own through Europe aged 13 when I studied with Herman Krebbers. Playing concerts and the participation in competitions also saw me travel. Travelling has always meant the same to me: a sense of curiosity combined with anticipation. I just never learned to enjoy packing and have little talent at editing my suitcase...

Let's stay still with childhood and musical education. Your doctoral thesis concerns the pedagogy of playing the violin throughout 20th century and addresses its development in the 21st century. You wrote a textbook on teaching violin-playing for children: "Michaela's Music House, The Magic of the Violin". You are an educator, you give masterclasses... If you only performed, you would not feel fulfilled?

Playing is the central thing in my life, whether on my own or with friends and colleagues, but teaching gives me a different view on what I do and fresh impulses. Students often ask interesting questions, and working with them is a form of working on myself. My students have begun to refer to my classes as 'The Laboratory'. We experiment and question the assumed truths we've been told.

I have the impression that music for you would not reach its fullness without all the social framing around it, e.g. without festivals. Is this important?

Music for me is very fulfilling. As such, I don't need any frills around it to make the experience better for me. However, music, per very definition of the act of composing, has always stood within a social framework. The moment I begin to play a piece I did not compose myself, I go into contract with the composer. That is the first point of social contact already. Thereafter, I do believe that music cannot be played by every person, but it can be enjoyed by every person. The moment a person listens to music, there is human interaction. Sharing that experience with an audience and friends or colleagues is a major bonus, of course.

And if Gwendolyn Masin found herself on a deserted island, what would music be for her? What could it still be?

I'm so glad you didn't ask which music I would take along! That list would be enormous. Music stays the same for me, no matter what the environment: what changes is the story I tell with it, or the stories I'm told.

I have already asked about traveling, but about the one in childhood. You still frequently move from one place to another. Where is Gwendolyn Masin at home?

I spent years trying to figure out which culture I most identify with. After a long struggle, I stopped trying and realised that I feel most at home in the hearts of the people I love, and in music.

For the end, I left something that is particularly interesting to me: music composed nowadays. We live here and now, don't we? You have many world premieres of contemporary works in your repertoire. You are known for this. Bravo! What's more, you commission compositions from composers yourself. For me, this is a great thing. About which composition of this kind would you like to tell Presto readers?

Thank you so much for the compliment! I think one of the commissioned works that have most become a part of me is the Violin Concerto by John Buckley that he wrote for me. It was a journey of fifteen years from the moment the idea was born to the moment I gave its premiere in the USA. It was possible to work closely with the composer, whom I consider a friend, and to influence various parts of it, including the long cadenza. I have performed the piece a number of times and hope that it will be recognised for the masterpiece it is.

Thank you very much for your time and our conversation.

Biographical Note:

Descendant of a lineage of classically-trained musicians, Gwendolyn Masin is one of today's significant concert violinists. Gwendolyn has performed to critical acclaim throughout Europe and in Asia, in South Africa and Middle East, as well as in North America. She performs both as a soloist accompanied by renowned orchestras and as a chamber musician.

In November 2017, Masin released her album *Flame* (Orchid Classics), subsequently embarking on the *Flame* album tour around Switzerland and Germany. One of the compositions which she performs on the album is "Song of Roxana" from the opera "King Roger" by Karol Szymanowski.