

Gwendolyn Masin, Origin – Exploring Roots and Identity



Gwendolyn Masin

Born in Amsterdam, raised in Ireland, and descended from a long line of musicians from Central and Eastern Europe, Gwendolyn Masin explores her rich roots in 'Origin', writes Adrian Smith.

ADRIAN SMITH

Gwendolyn Masin's *Origin – Edition Deluxe* is a re-release of her first solo album, simply titled *Origin*, which was first launched last year. The new edition features an extra track – an arrangement for chamber ensemble of Camille Saint-Saëns's famous tone poem *Danse Macabre* – which is inserted as the first track on the new release.

The concept behind the album is Masin's own genealogy. Although born in Amsterdam and raised in Ireland, Masin descends from a long line of musicians from Central and Eastern Europe. Drawing on these roots yielded some of the pieces featured here such as Bartók's Romanian Dances and Jascha Heifetz's transcription of Grigoras Dinicu's *Hora Staccato*, but there are also other numbers which form the basis of the violinist's ready-to-hand repertoire for encores and bravura displays of technical wizardry. Apart from this, the overarching theme linking the various pieces together is inspiration from folk music, either from a composer's native land or borrowed from another tradition, an aspect intended to reflect Masin's own multi-cultural heritage. Indeed the liner notes elaborate on this in some detail and, it has to be said, in rather fanciful prose that tells us that, amongst other things, 'the maturation of Gwendolyn from childhood prodigy to professional musician was synergistic – a player shepherding her heritage and multi-cultural background into the ever-changing world of classical music and traditional folk pieces. In her search for her own identity, music seems to have found Gwendolyn'.

Renewed edginess

Whatever about the music finding Gwendolyn, she herself seems to have found a first-class arranger in the form of Irish composer Raymond Deane (well known for *Danse Macabres* of a very different kind) who deserves more than an honourable mention for expertly arranging many of the pieces on the album. Most of these items will be familiar to listeners as they form part and parcel of every virtuoso violinist's pyrotechnic playbook, and if they were trotted out in their usual format the album would undoubtedly be competing in an already crowded marketplace. But what makes this release different is precisely the decision to recast these familiar pieces in pared-back arrangements that invests them with a renewed edginess, while the addition of the cimbalom – played by Miklós Lukács – on four of the tracks is a wonderfully imaginative touch in keeping with the folk-inspired theme. Giving Lukács a track to himself performing his own composition *Bartók Impressions* – a fantasia based on the Romanian Dances that follow immediately after – is also indicative of the well-thought-out ordering of the pieces.

As one would expect from a performer of her stature, Masin's own playing is technically flawless but, crucially, it also steers clear of that chic blandness which so often characterises these virtuoso portraits and makes them indistinguishable from each other. There is certainly plenty of grain to her style, which at its most captivating reaches a blazing intensity in her interpretation of Ernst Bloch's 'Nigun (Improvisation)' from *Baal Shem*, perhaps the stand-out piece on the album. Elsewhere there are no shortage of displays of technical feats, from the abundance of violinistic trickery – rapid artificial harmonics, left-hand pizzicato – in Ravel's *Tzigane* to the improvisatory style double-stopping and ricochet bowing in Manuel de Falla's *Danse Espagnole*, all of which are negotiated expertly. The latter piece is also a good example of the tight bond between Masin and the rest of the ensemble who are alert to her every move: listen to the tasteful gradations of tempo from 1:40 onwards which give the impression of a joyous spontaneity entirely suited to this type of music.

Overall this is a well-conceived portrait combining first-rate musicianship with a thoughtful reinterpretation of some of the great classics of the virtuoso violin repertoire.

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