

Gwendolyn Masin on the adrenaline rush of performing

Gwendolyn Masin (45) is a concert violinist, teacher, author and festival director. Born in the Netherlands, Masin has lived in South Africa and Dublin. She now lives in Switzerland with her husband and their three-year-old son. From August 1-6, she is leading the fifth International Master Course at the National Concert Hall, Dublin, an intensive summer school for musicians that also includes concert performances on August 2 and 6; nch.ie.

What were you like growing up?

I was quite introverted, very observant, and I was careful. When you start playing music at a young age and you show some promise, you become very aware of broken arms and broken hands and what that means. There isn't a music teacher in the world who isn't going to say to a student: "Be careful when you got out to play."

What were the challenges of a peripatetic childhood?

I didn't fit in for a long time and I knew it. When I was in Holland I didn't look like other kids. I wasn't the tall, blonde, boisterous, outgoing, direct type. There was a lot of travel, and I was in a steady flow of culture shock. I was often the new girl. It was teetering between 'is she going to get bullied, or will she be grand or ignored?' A lot of it has to do with language. When I came to Ireland, I had a strong South African accent. It sounded very posh but we had absolutely no money. We lived in a rented house with mice in it. I changed my accent within three weeks of arriving in Ireland. I remember thinking, 'if you want to survive here, change your accent'. I did and it worked.

Are you from a musical family?

Both my parents were violinists and my grandmother was a pianist. She taught me piano and I enjoyed it and then I got a violin for my fifth birthday.

What do you love about playing the violin?

I find the process of getting to play music exciting and challenging. It's a bit like dabbling with



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the unknown everyday. Adrenaline junkies look for bungee jumps and similarly, with the violin, I'm looking for that thing which pushes me every day. I'm not interested in applause. I'm interested in the exchange of energies with the audience. That's what keeps me going back.

Define yourself in three words.

Compassionate. Humbled. And I try to put things in perspective.

Best advice given?

My mother is full of great advice about overcoming performance anxiety. She transforms negative feelings into a positive. The word 'nervous' is banned; she says: "Say 'excited' instead." She says: "Imagine you are a bird. Fly with the music. You are soaring."

Best advice you give?

Learn to smile even if you don't feel happy. It releases happy hormones and balances out your mood.

Any tips on how to teach children to play an instrument?

As long as it's not described to a child as work. It has to remain playful and you have to keep that sense of fun. But there are hours

involved and you do have to put them in. But there were always things on the horizon which kept me going, like playing in a youth orchestra with like-minded children. I started travelling on my own to concerts in my early teens. It was scary, but exciting. It set me apart from others.

Did motherhood change you?

It made me look at women differently and gave me a sense of sisterhood. It also shed light on the difficulty musicians have, like: 'Can I afford to have a child?' There is no daycare at night-time when we are on stage.

How would you describe your Master Course at the National Concert Hall?

It's a week-long immersion in music. Anyone can come in off the street and watch the masterclasses for free.

Is it all music at home?

No. My husband isn't a musician. He's an engineer. Being with people who live in different work-worlds offers different horizons. It makes life richer.

'Learn to smile even if you don't feel happy,' says Gwendolyn Masin

Interview by Ciara Dwyer

Picture by Beat Schweizer