

# The Arts

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## The art of making music fun



ARMINTA WALLACE

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

**L**EARNING 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-



your, 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](http://www.opus2.ie), price €42

### 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...

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