



# MONICA GERMINO



*Monica Germino looks every bit the trendy young violinist; which very much seems to be the image of today's new breed of female fiddlers. It's a look exemplified by the likes of performers such as Vanessa-Mae and the all-girl, string-playing group, Bond. And while Monica Germino also plays in an all-girl quartet\*, make no mistake about it, there is nothing frivolous, lightweight or commercial about this girl, or her band, as **Rosemary Duffy** discovered when she caught up with Monica during a break in rehearsals at the Queensland Biennial Festival of Music.*

**T**he Spark Bar of Brisbane's Powerhouse is buzzing. The Queensland Biennial Festival of Music is two days short of finishing and the place is full of music critics (taking a break from a 3-day symposium), musicians (taking a break from various rehearsals) and people like me who have come in search of something different and exciting. Tonight's concert promises to deliver exactly that combination of the new and the extraordinary. Amsterdam's Orkest de Volharding is performing for the first time in Australia and the program looks good: three Australian and two world premieres of works by the ensemble's famous and charismatic founder, Louis Andriessen. Sitting opposite me is the very youthful, very hip Monica Germino. In a few hours time she will take her place on stage with vocalist Cristina Zavalloni for the world

premiere of a new version of Andriessen's *Passeggiata* composed in 1999.

This is not the first time Monica Germino has played with the august Orkest de Volharding. She has toured with them before with her quartet, Electra. Louis Andriessen has also written a piece for Electra which they recorded last year for a Hal Hartley film called *The New Math(s)*, one of four short films commissioned by the BBC.

Monica Germino has been playing the violin since she was six. She grew up in a small town in Virginia, USA where she began learning the violin using the Suzuki method. She studied with James Buswell at the New England Conservatory for four years from the age of 19 and credits Buswell as being the one who really set her on the career path to being a professional violinist. Syoko Aki at Yale University was her next teacher after which she was awarded a



**MONICA GERMINO AND VOCALIST CRISTINA ZAVALLONI**

Frank Huntington Beebe Grant which enabled her to study with Vera Beths at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. Three very different teachers with very different approaches but all, Monica says, equally valuable in terms of what she learned from them. James Buswell's approach to playing she describes as "wonderful.... very analytical", although his famous (infamous?) Saturday Etude Classes were not for the faint-hearted. As Monica tells it, a student's etude booking with Buswell was made according to how advanced they were. Paganini etudes, for example, were scheduled at 9 o'clock, Wieniawski at 10, and then at 11 perhaps Rochberg, Gaviniès or Rode would be the musical fare. It was a somewhat Spartan system that rewarded improvement with an earlier timeslot! So if you found yourself playing Paganini caprices first thing on a Saturday, you knew you were doing O.K. It was a regime, Monica remembers, that took a lot of the fun out of Friday night. James Buswell also kept a chart outside his studio on which were listed the names of all his pupils and the five pieces each was playing at the time. The compulsory five were a concerto, a work by Bach, a sonata, a 20<sup>th</sup> century piece and a 'show' (virtuosic) piece; nothing like a bit of healthy competition to get the blood pumping.

Syoko Aki's style was a complete contrast to Buswell's; the former having a more general approach which complemented the latter's very "specific" teaching style. With Vera Beths, Monica's focus then

became firmly fixed on 20<sup>th</sup> century

about cross rhythms, ambiguity about who

things very slowly, counting in your head

repertoire, and in her time with Beths she played as much of it as possible, starting in the very first week with the Prokofiev Violin Sonata which Vera Beths suggested she learn by heart. Monica Germino is now a dedicated advocate of contemporary and 20<sup>th</sup> century music and has premiered new works in concert halls and festivals in Europe, America, and now Australia.

Looking back over her career Monica can see a very direct, almost inevitable line of progress from her student years in Boston to where she is at this particular point in time, working with Louis Andriessen and playing his music. The line that connects them is, she believes, the music of Stravinsky for which she developed a great love in her final year at Boston when she was studying composers such as Stravinsky, Ives, Schoenberg while at the same time learning the Stravinsky concerto. Both strands came together and a lifelong passion for the music of Stravinsky was born. It is a passion shared by Louis Andriessen who acknowledges his debt to the great composer: "He [Stravinsky] is in my heart and my consciousness so strongly all the time. Harmony, ostinatos, ideas

is on the beat and who is on the syncopation; there are all kinds of tricks I learned from Stravinsky." As it turns out, Monica found out about Andriessen because he had done a residency at Yale a couple of years before she studied there. It was Andriessen who introduced her to Vera Beths and this in turn led to her moving to the Netherlands to study. She has since "married a lovely Dutch man" and now calls Amsterdam home.

Monica Germino might be a 20<sup>th</sup> century specialist but this doesn't preclude her from playing the music of Bach every day as part of her practice regime. During her time at Yale, Monica studied with Jaap Schröder, an expert in Baroque performance practice and Bach is still a compulsory part of her 'daily dozen'. She plays a different piece each time and tests herself, not by playing it at breakneck speed, but by playing it slowly: "If you can play a piece very slowly then you know you've mastered it. My teachers always said 'If you can't write it out you don't know it'. I've had to write out a Bach fugue from memory; can you imagine! I've found that it is a really incredible way to check your memory. But the best, the most practical way to test yourself is to play

or out aloud." Monica happily admits to being quite neurotic about her practice regime and rarely deviates from a set routine. As well as the Bach she plays "at least half an hour of scales, different ways of doing them [see inset Monica's Secret Scales Study]; lots of double stopping; lots of intonation practice and lots of vibrato exercises working on the speed of the vibrato. I'm currently working on achieving a steady 52 oscillations per beat.

Somehow I can't see Bond getting their fingers around that lot each day.

**Rosemary Duffy**

P.S. Just in case you were wondering: the Andriessen concert was sensational, Monica was fabulous, and for my money, the performances I heard that night were easily the highlight of the Festival.

\*Much of Monica Germino's time is spent playing with the quartet, Electra, founded in 1996. Coming from different countries (USA, Bulgaria, The Netherlands and Germany), the members of Electra are dedicated to exploring new approaches to music-making and performance, incorporating visual and theatrical elements.

## MONICA'S SECRET CYCLE OF SCALES

*I have a regime which I practice every day where I go through the 24 keys in an octave moving down the violin. It's quite clever and very difficult. Vera Beths taught it to me and I haven't seen it in any books. This is what you do:*

You start in G major with your first finger on the note G (A string, sixth position). You play a G major scale, one octave and then you go down a minor third to the relative minor key of E minor and play up and down one octave of the E minor scale. Having returned to the note E (the same pitch as the open E string), you then rise a tone to F# and repeat the entire routine just described, but a semitone lower than before, so you play an F# major scale up and down an octave, continuing the descent beyond F# to D#, to play a D# minor (the relative minor) scale up and down, returning to D#, then rising a tone to E# (which of course is F, enharmonically speaking) and then down again to the relative minor key. This pattern continues through all the keys until eventually you come back to where you started, i.e. G major (on the D string).



**ELECTRA (CLOCKWISE FROM CENTRE):  
MONICA GERMINO (VIOLIN)  
MARIJJE VAN STRALEN (SOPRANO)  
INA WIECZOREK (RECORDER)  
TATIANA KOLEVA (PERCUSSION)**