

Diane Monroe: Interview

One critic has described your playing as having “the warmth and breath of a voice.”

I want to make the instrument sing. I want to produce a sound that is thick and rich and breathes as I breathe. I want to make music that moves people.

It’s rare to find a violinist who embraces both classical composers and jazz improvisation.

During all those years of classical training I struggled and still struggle to make the violin sing without tension. Then I began to slowly absorb the words of mentor Karen Tuttle when she explained that all I needed was to experience the same freedom of movement and phrasing on the violin that I naturally expressed while improvising on the guitar and piano. So, I began to improvise on the violin during my journey with the Uptown String Quartet. As I freed myself to improvise on this so called classical instrument, I gradually discovered that the path to freedom to make phrases in composed music was the exactly same. It was an epiphany. For me, all genres connect at the level of the phrase. Pablo Casals said that “all music, in general, is a succession of rainbows”. We phrase within the rainbows to make a composition “speak”.

How does that translate to the audience?

Phrasing brings the composition to life. It indicates all the gestures and ebbs and flows that sentences do. Phrasing makes the composition coherent to the listener. Phrasing has the power to touch both our hearts and minds.

Sometimes you call your instrument a “fiddle.” That doesn’t sound very classical.

Well, the violin is commonly referred to as a “fiddle” when someone’s playing bluegrass and other country music. Then there are the traditions of Irish fiddling, Scottish fiddling, African fiddling, etc. Jazz artists call it the violin sometimes and a fiddle at other times. In these contexts, it’s about being free-spirited and having fun. When the violin is called “The Fiddle” by a classical musician, it is often meant as honorable and endearing, almost to the point of coveting the instrument. The thing I love about the violin is, it can be both fun and serious.

It’s difficult to categorize what you do.

I want people to listen beyond categories. My favorite pieces these days aren’t about their genre but about how heart-wrenching they are. Ralph Towner’s “Take Heart.” Brahms’ G Major Violin Sonata. Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto. Bonnie Raitt and Herbie Hancock performing “I Ain’t Gonna Let You Break My Heart Again.”

When you organize a program, what experience are you shaping for the audience?

To begin with, I choose the most powerful, truthful pieces of music--nothing watered-down. I’m talking about the power that comes directly at you with the force of great passion. I take these threads of emotion and shape them into a story, so to speak, that flows from beginning to end. And I make sure that there is variety, because I want the audience to go down to the depths and then come up for air.